

## **A Quiet Form of Therapy by DelilahJack**

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**Summary:** The aftermath of season 2, and how Joyce and Hopper adjust to the death of Bob. Bit of angst. Rated M for later chapters.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 – 'Out of the Rabbit Hole'

Whisky truly was a magical thing, a good one shone like gold and burnt the back of your throat like fire. For a moment it would make you forget everything except the taste of peat and smoke at the back of your throat. It numbed everything else around you, and muffled the sounds of your own internal goddamn monologue. Teamed up with a beer and a smoke and you had yourself a party.

Jim Hopper was propping up the bar, twisting the glass of whisky around on the suspiciously sticky surfaces of his local. He had spent the last twenty minutes waxing lyrical about the wonderful properties of alcohol, although he'd lost the concept of space and time somewhere around the 7th drink. Before that it had been dark rotting material and twisting vines, claustrophobia and spores.

It had been two days since the night Eleven had sent the Thesselhydra back to whatever hell it had come from. The kid had been pretty much comatose since then, wrapped up in her blankets she'd barely acknowledged his presence and stirred only to drink and use the bathroom. Hopper wasn't offended, he'd seen it in Vietnam, extreme exhaustion shut out all other functions other than those required for existence. The Wheeler kid had told him that using her powers tired Eleven out, and she had sure put on the telekinetic firework display.

As a result he had allowed himself a two day beer fest to process what he had seen. He vowed to himself that he would be sober when she woke up, then he could make amends for being a total asshole. When he said to himself that he would 'process' his freshest nightmares, he really meant entire alcohol annihilation. He had almost lost everything that was slowly becoming precious to him. He had seen a grown man torn to pieces by demidogs (Dustin wouldn't stop correcting him about the term and it had eventually caught.) He asked himself whether he was cursed and how much could one average joe go through in a lifetime, without wondering whether someone out there had it in for him. After Vietnam and the death of his little girl, he had thought that life had no more suffering to offer.

That was until Will Byers went missing and some fresh hell was unleashed, dredging up those memories he had fought so hard to suppress. The loss of his friend Benny and other residents of the Hawkins community, coupled with the responsibility of policing the town had left him thanking whatever powers that be for his medication.

Despite all this fear and uncertainty, they had come out of the other side. Eleven was back with him where she belonged and the other kids were safe. Life would slowly return to some form of normality, and normality had previously meant drinking. Hopper supposed that this last booze cruise was his way of saying goodbye to his past, although he had long given up being philosophical in the mid-morning sunlight of the bar. At the moment he was considering whether he could make alcohol out of pretzels.

'Hey Hop, I would ask if you want another drink but it's 11am and you're starting to put the alcoholics off their stride.'

'Sorry Dale, but can't you see I'm celebrating?' Hopper grabbed his glass and thrust it in the air like a trophy.

'I sure do, and it must have been a heck of a victory for ya judging by the way you're knocking back that Rye. I take it's your day off?'

Hopper winked and tried to tap his nose conspiratorially but happened to miss and his elbow slipped off the bar. An arc of whisky shot into the air and landed on his jeans; 'Aww hell', he mumbled.

'I guess that's the sign that my luck is 'bout to change and I should head home' Hopper sighed and slammed some bills onto the bar. Dale watched as this hulk of a man, the Chief of Hawkins Police scrunch up his face as he tried to put on his hat and stumble towards the exit. 'See ya later Dale', Hopper slurred as he wandered out, pointing at the other down n' outs and saying; 'Don't DUI kids.'

It was November, and the blast of air in his face sobered him enough to realise that navigating a giant human keg through the woods would be less than graceful. Grumbling to himself he turned up the collar of his coat and pulled his hat down to shield his eyes from the wind and disappeared into a break in the foliage behind the bar. The

cabin was warm when he finally stumbled through the door; 'Don't know why I call it the local, an hour walk sure as hell ain't nearby.' Hopper could already feel the beginning of his hangover seeping into the edge of his consciousness, and it was making him grouchy as hell.

'You're drunk' a small but intense voice said from the couch.

A low curse escaped his lips, she had woken up and here he was a sweaty drunken mess. He schooled his mood, and desperately tried to notch up his sobriety.

'El, you're up, I'm sorry you shouldn't have to see this. I had about ten drinks too many by my reckoning.'

He walked over to the couch and sunk into it like a deflated kid who realised the game was up, he had managed to get one sleeve of his coat off and it was dangling uselessly at his side.

'How you feeling kiddo?'

She looked at him with a guarded expression. She had never seen a drunk man in person before, sure Hop had had beers before at the cabin but he always stuck to two and it was usually after a long day. Her whole experience of the matter stemmed from her TV education, soaps had portrayed drunks as being very similar to uncoordinated children. Hopper didn't look that bad, his brow was furrowed like he was angry but his eyes were soft.

'Better'

Hopper ruffled her hair, and after running a hand over his eyes he glanced at the percolator in the corner of the kitchenette. Caffeine would be his only saviour now.

'Ok, we need to talk Miss but first I need a coffee.'

Eleven stood and shook her head; 'No you need sleep.'

He grumbled as she tugged his coat sleeve; 'But you just woke up. I'm sorry you were on your own.'

Eleven still had not adjusted to the idea of someone feeling remorse

for leaving her alone or afraid. She wasn't used to someone communicating with her, rather than at her and issuing instruction. It made her smile at him.

'Hey', he said as he smiled back at her.

'Go to sleep.' She said with as much authority as a child with extraordinary powers can say anything. He followed her command and shuffled off into his room, collapsing on his sheets and breathing deeply. His last thoughts as a drunk were how the sheets smelt of a different detergent than normal.

When he awoke later that afternoon, the light shining through the curtains felt like the equivalent of a thousand needles in his head, moaning he grabbed his pillow and shoved it over his face, contemplating suffocation. Somehow the smell of coffee permeated through the downy mask, and like a man who awakens to find he happily hasn't died, his senses returned slowly. Next he registered bacon, and possibly waffles. With the practiced movements of a man who regularly awakens to alcohol regret he slid from the bed and slowly made his way to the living room. Eleven had done a stand up job, there was coffee the way he liked it, a cigarette next to a steaming plate of food, and his messages. She was clearly making an effort to make up for their argument.

'Thanks Kid, you know you didn't have to do this. We forgave each other already.'

Eleven shrugged and starting eating. It was a comfortable silence but there was too much to say, too much praise and too many important questions about her new fashion choices.

'I am sorry about last night though, I thought you would be out for longer. It won't happen again. This is me now, sober Hop, K?'

Eleven nodded and gave a small smile.

'Ok, so spill it Miss. What have you been doing while I was trying to save the world?'

For the next couple of hours they talked, Hop took the day off work

and they spent it together. Discussing what would happen next, and how he wanted her to stay. He only told her once that she was most the remarkable and brave person he had met, bar the one other woman he knew who was just as stubborn as Eleven. He could have told her how proud of her he was, but an ego coupled with super powers was a bit beyond his capabilities.

## 2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two – 'It's no use going back to Yesterday, because I was a different person then...'

It looked like the Department of Energy was going to be shut for the foreseeable. Great hoardings had gone up around the building and it was watched by covert and overt eyes twenty-four hours a day. Hopper wondered how they got the bodies out without the reporters noticing; hordes of local and national film crews had made an impromptu camp outside the gates. The conspiracy nuts had of course turned up, and even with their habit of seeing things that weren't there the Department of Energy somehow managed to remove any trace of the massacre. Hopper didn't have a lot of time to dwell on the matter though, the month following the night of the Thesselhydra was spent with press conferences regarding the death of Barbara Holland, orchestrating a better deal for Eleven with Doctor Owens, and finding some kind of makeshift education for the kid that didn't involve Dallas. Hopper had also been concerned that the three members of the Hawkins Policing Community would come under fire for what had happened in the sleepy town, however most people seemed to pity Hopper and the local community refused to use a bad word against him to the press. Yes their Chief was a little overweight, he smoked and drank more than was good for him, and he was known to use his fists freely to resolve a dispute. He was also grouchy as hell, but everyone in Hawkins agreed that there was no one they'd like better to fight their corner.

More often than he liked Hopper found himself on the road to the Byers place without any ability to stop and go in. He wanted so badly to know how they were all doing. He hadn't even offered to help fix the mess that a catapulted demidog causes to a window. He had heard through the grapevine that Will was back home with no evident long term health concerns. His heart glowed for the kid, to survive two such traumatic experiences and still spring back showed how strong he was. He wasn't surprised that Will Byers was made out of sterner stuff despite his delicate frame, he was his mother's son after all. In truth that was one of the main reasons he excused himself from the house, he didn't think he could bear to see Joyce mourning

over Bob, she had already dealt with so much and now she had to go back to doing it alone. She had called him several times at the Station and at the Cabin, but after leaving a few messages with Flo and Eleven and getting very little in return, communication had dwindled. As he drove through he always found himself craning his head towards their place as long as he possibly could before he risked a collision.

Elsewhere, the Loser gang had returned to some form of normality, albeit with two extra female members. Hopper was allowing them to visit Eleven three times a week after making them swear to be careful and take a different route each time. The first time they had turned up at the door of the cabin Eleven had heard them before the knock. She could hear Dustin whispering loudly; 'Jeez Lucas you dumbass, Chief said the knock was like this!' There were then more distant knocks, and she smiled at how wrong the sequence was. Mike was then saying; 'That's the Imperial March Dusty, why do you always do that?! We're not trying to get into Vader's breathing chamber!'

'IT'S CATCHY OK?!' Dustin shouted. At this four voices chimed in and started bickering, several more attempts at secret knocks were made; 'That's Terminator!'. Eleven made the decision to answer the door after Lucas put on a deep voice and said; 'I'LL BE BACK!'. As the door swung open Will, Dustin, Mike, Lucas and Max fell across the threshold still arguing with other. When they saw their friend, the boys clambered up and embraced Eleven tightly. Max stood a little apart, partly in embarrassment but mostly from awe. It felt so good to Eleven to be wanted and appreciated by people of her own age, she still didn't really understand how to act around them all and it made her nervous and anxious to please. With Will and Mike though she could always be herself, and throughout the night she found herself looking to them for reassurance.

After enjoying the warmth of their embraces, saturated with the sweat and emerging adolescence of four boys, Eleven looked at Max loitering by the door and eyed her suspiciously. She had remembered that twisting rage and despair in her gut when she saw Max and Mike exchange smiles in the gym. Eleven was unsure of when Max had become part of the group, but she wasn't sure she liked it. Her 'Papa' had always warned her against strangers, when she wasn't trying to



channel their conversations. There wasn't much time to dwell on it however, the boys were all shouting again, asking El a thousand questions at once. Dustin had emptied his rucksack out onto the floor and was smiling with as many of his teeth on show as possible. There were video's strewn all around him, and raising his arms triumphantly he said; 'Prepare for your Education!'

Eleven looked at him with smiling confusion and she leant down to look at some of the titles, there was a film with a giant fish on the cover, one called Star Wars, and another with a man in a hat not unlike Hopper's who was raiding an ark, apparently. 'Which one do you wanna watch first El?' Dustin asked. Eleven looked hesitantly about her, and pointed to the film about Arks, whatever they were.

Will smiled at her warmly and said to her; 'That's one of my favourites, I think you'll like it'. Eleven smiled back at Will and said; 'Me too.' Now that the film was picked, there was the serious business of preparing the viewing area and snacks. Lucas and Will went to town, finding every blanket and cushion in the cabin and throwing them either on the couch or on the floor around it. Dustin produced the snacks from some other hidden compartment in his back pack, which included Pop Corn, Candy in a quantity that looked to be as heavy as he was, and chips. Max helped him strategically portion it all out and place it within grabbing distance for each person.

Mike was standing awkwardly next to Eleven, at a loss for something to do and afraid to speak until he asked nervously; 'You want me to show you how to make Popcorn Eleven?'. Her shy little 'Yes' brought out a broad grin to his face and they went over to the Kitchenette to inspect the tools. Eleven didn't know the etiquette surrounding having guests, especially if one of them was unwanted. She guessed however that making Max pee herself would not be welcomed by the group, and Hopper would most likely make her clean up the mess. She remembered though her first evening at Mike's, and skipping the idea of presenting each of them with a fresh set of clothes she went into the kitchenette and pulled down enough glasses for all of them, even Max. Eleven had not yet forgotten the feeling of being disliked based purely on first impressions like Lucas had. Building up some courage she marched over to Max who was arguing with Dustin over the Candy/Chip ratio and placed a glass down in front her. Max

smiled at Eleven tentatively and held out her hand; 'Hi, I'm Max.' Mike had to nudge Eleven to accept the offered hand, which prompted another spasm of jealousy in the girl's heart. Why was Mike trying to get them to like each other? Eleven took the hand, which was clammy to the touch and dropped it almost instantly, she then turned on her heel walked back to preparing the popcorn. Mike followed her and whilst making a show of explaining the popcorn process, whispered to Eleven; 'I didn't like Max much either at first, but she's actually ok. I didn't even want her in the club but her and Lucas are sweet on each other.' Eleven looked at Mike in confusion; 'Sweet on each other?' Mike attempted to explain; 'Yeah, well they *like* like each other. Not like friends, but more.' Eleven stood in contemplation for several moments until she suddenly understood; 'Lucas thinks Max is pretty?'

Mike went beet red, and stuttered his reply; 'Uh, Yeah.' He then threw all his attention into the popcorn which had started to pop on the stove. Such welcome intelligence lifted the spectre of jealousy from Eleven like a spell. At least she wouldn't have to clean up any pee and she threw herself into learning mode with gusto, standing much closer to Mike than previously.

After such a flurry of loud activity, the six kids stood and surveyed their work in silence. A veritable haven of cinema was in front of them, a utopia of diabetes and square eyes.

The silence didn't last long as everyone tried to claim their preferred spot, with a lot of shoving and cussing thrown in for good measure. Eleven was allowed to pick her spot, nobody, least of all Lucas, wanted to argue with a girl who was capable of throwing them across the room with her mind.

The group devoured one movie after another, discussing how the special effects were made, quoting the lines and arguing over who shot first, Guido or Han. Eleven was rapt, sitting forward with her arms resting on her thighs, she drunk it all in. The adventure, the fight between good and evil, and on one occasion a man against a giant fish with huge teeth. At one point during 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' when the main character escaped from a giant boulder, Eleven declared that night as the best of her life so far. She was shocked when she realised that from now on there would be many more

nights like this. Her adventures now, like those in the movies were potentially limitless. The little super hero suddenly felt powerful in an entirely new way.

When Hopper returned late that night, he found four boys and two girls slumped on the sofa and floor of his cabin like dead bumblebee's. There was mess and popcorn everywhere, and Dustin was snoring. Lucas's forearm was thrown over Dustin's forehead presumably in an attempt to silence the snoring with his hand. The candy coma must have taken Lucas before he managed to silence the powerful noises coming from the kid's chest. Eleven's head was resting on Mike's shoulder and Hopper made his way over to her, avoiding the minefield of packets on the floor. Gently stroking her nose with his index finger he waited until she stirred and opened her eyes. The blissful sleep of childhood was etched on her face; 'Hey Kiddo, did you have a good time?'

She mumbled a 'Yes' at him and smiled. He chuckled and said; 'What am I supposed to do with all these kids missing from their homes huh?'

'They called home, said they were having a sleepover at Will's. Mrs Byers said it was OK.'

'Mrs Byers did, did she? Well remind me that I'll have to repay her the favour some time.' He said as he looked around and surveyed the mess. Eleven had started to slip back off into sleep, but not wanting her to wake with a sore neck in the morning, Hop said to her; 'Come on hon, time for bed.' He picked her up, wrapping her arm across his shoulders and cradling her in his own strong arms. As he negotiated his way over the sleeping forms of children, Eleven made a noise of discontent; 'Couch' she muttered.

'Nuh-uh, you get host privilege of your own bed, the rest can suffer bad necks and backs in the morning, but not you.'

After tucking her in and checking the cabin was secure, Hop collapsed into bed. He didn't want to think about clearing up the mess in the morning, but he fell asleep with a smile on his face for the first time in years.

The other members of the Losers Club slept on soundly, despite being moved out of their contortionist sleeping styles and into more comfortable positions. Each was issued their own blanket and glass of water by their gruff Chief of Police.

### 3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3 – 'If you don't know where you are going, it doesn't matter what road you take'

Exiting the diner with the envelope held tight in his hand, Hopper made his way across the parking lot to his Blazer. As he threw himself into the driving seat and threw the engine into life, one of his favourite songs came on the radio. Lighting up a cigarette and smiling through the smoke, Hop's fingers started to automatically tap out the rhythm on the wheel. Eleven was officially his daughter, and whilst they hadn't actually discussed it, she had made it very clear she intended to call their cabin home. She refused point blank to return to Theresa who had betrayed her, but Hopper agreed that he would take Eleven to visit her mother as soon as everything died down.

Halfway back to the station Hopper realised his face was hurting from the smile plastered on his face. He wanted to tell everyone and had to restrain himself from leaning out the window and shouting it to the pedestrians. His first thought was to tell Joyce, but after shading her out for the past month he felt unsure of his footing.

He decided to call her, it was much safer if she was angry, and he wouldn't have to avoid things being thrown at him. Automatically recalling her rota without dwelling much on how he knew her shift pattern by heart, he practically skipped into the station and was met by Flo. She was stood directly in his path, hands on hips and pursing her lips. She eyed him with an expression of despair.

'Where have you been Chief, Gale Barrett called and said you didn't show up at his?'

Hop took her gently by the shoulders and smiled down into her face, she had to manipulate her neck into an almost unnatural position to look up at him.

'Sorry Flo, something else came up and I thought it was more important than an errant racoon.'

As he spoke he gently twisted Flo to the side so that he could pass, humming some kind of Waltz tune as he did so.

'Hey Boss' said Powell from behind his magazine. The officer was leaning back in his chair with his legs resting on his desk, the very image of energetic industry. 'New crisis at the Byers? we figured that's what must have been keeping you so long'.

Hop sauntered over and leaning over Powell he said; 'No, but congratulations. Your fertile imagination has won you a free pass to the zoo. The zoo being Gale Barrett's house, and the only attraction is a pesky racoon who keeps shitting in the zoo keeper's shoes. See you in a few hours Officer Powell.'

Callahan sitting nearby, wisely chose to say nothing rather than inspire a similar inane task from the Chief, but smiled contentedly at Powell. Powell in turn kindly issued his smug colleague a smack round the head with Playboy magazine as he trudged out of the station.

Hopper shouted to Flo that he wasn't to be disturbed and locked his office door. Sitting at his desk he lit another cigarette, and shoving the phone receiver in the crook of his neck, he dialled the Hawkins Convenience store number. As the line rang Hopper held up the certificate to the light and watched the motes of dust dance around it. Whilst the 'dust' of the Upside Down was more like snow, it wasn't as delicate or alluring as the rushing swirls of dead skin that spun around the piece of paper in his hand. The dust here was dead too, but it belonged to this world and the people in it.

The phone continued to ring, and Hop was just losing his nerve when the other end connected and her raspy but warm voice filled his ears. He experienced a sudden, unfathomable rush of breathlessness as she said; 'Hawkins Convenience'.

'Hey, it's me.' He stuttered, thinking he should probably clarify with; 'Hop' but Joyce beat him to it;

'Hop! Where have you been? Why haven't you been answering my calls?' Then in a whisper; 'How's Eleven?'

Hop chuckled, smiling somewhat inanely and wondering how he

could ever have thought she would be mad at him. 'Whoa there, one question at a time! Work, Sorry really busy, and she's good thanks. How are you and the boys?'

Joyce's voice became incrementally more subdued as she said; 'They're great Hop, Will seems pretty much back to normal and I barely see Jonathan, he's always with Nancy now studying.'

Hop snorted; 'Yeah right "studying", but I'm glad Will's ok. Not many kids could deal with what he's been through. You don't sound ok though, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, I'm just tired, been pulling double shifts to cover the damage to the house.'

Hoppers heart sank in shame at her reply. He was calling her on a selfish whim after being so distant. She didn't sound resentful that his kid had thrown a demon through her window though and he vowed that he would make amends for his callousness.

'So hey, tell me your news' she said in an effort to rouse herself.

Feeling shy out of disgust for himself Hopper said; 'I got the certificate through today, Eleven is now officially Jane Hopper.'

'Oh my God, Hopper that's amazing!' Joyce enthused down the phone.

Hop could hear people talking in the background, and he felt a sudden rush of anger as Joyce said; 'I have customers, can you call me later after you've told her?'

'Yeah sure', he said, although he felt no inclination to hang up the phone, and it seemed apparent that she felt the same as the line went quiet. As the seconds stretched on, and the voices became more insistent she broke the silence offering her love to El and hanging up the phone.

As he replaced the phone in the receiver, there was a rapping at his door. As he unlocked the door, the small but fearsome frame of Flo pushed her way into the room with his lunch. She unceremoniously dumped the food onto his desk and looked at him accusingly.

'Alright you, spill. What's with you today?'

'Flo I'm practically overflowing with goodwill for a change, and you're acting like I'm a Communist Spy. I only made Powell take one shitty call!'

'Language young man, you might be Chief but I won't stand for that nonsense. You've got a reputation to uphold.

Holding up his palms in defeat he said; 'I'm sorry I've got to have my little enjoyments, you won't let me eat doughnuts anymore.'

Looking suitably chastised, which in this jubilant mood consisted of him poking out his bottom lip and making eyes like a wounded animal. Hopper was always sarcastic when he was in a good mood, and generally sarcastic when he wasn't.

'Do not pull that face at me Jimmy Hopper'

'Yes Ma'am', he said as he sank into his chair.

'Now, what's got you in this mood?'

'Things seem to be going my way for a change is all.'

Flo clucked softly and replied; 'Uh Huh, and does this have anything to do with a woman?'

'A little one yeah.', He said as he spun himself round in his chair.

'I see' she nodded conspiratorially. Hopper leaned forward and tapped his nose in response. The corners of Flo's mouth turned up slightly; 'Well I'm glad, you've certainly taken your time about it. Ted, God rest his soul always said you two were sweet on each other. He said he lost count of the times he had to separate you in science'

'What? You mean Joyce?' The realisation hit him like a sledgehammer; 'No, I wasn't talking about her'.

Flo had turned her back on him and was walking towards the door. Hopper's phone began to ring and as the door closed, Flo poked her head back round, and tapped her nose at him mischievously;



'Whatever you say Chief.'

The Chief dealt with the call pretty quickly, although later he couldn't recall who he had spoken too, or what it was about. The rest of the day passed as a blur and as Hopper made his way home to the cabin, the birth certificate was momentarily forgotten. Flo's comments were playing on his mind, that she assumed he and Joyce had got together had strangely unsettled him. He told himself that it was because Bob was still a recent bereavement and it was macabre of Flo to presume that Joyce could get over a relationship that fast. He ignored the small fluttering in his chest that always arose when someone presumed to mention the closeness of their relationship. He desperately tried to concentrate on something else, but the memories returned unbidden in front of him.

'Jim Hopper, get your chair away from me. You smell like a dog' Joyce drawled. They were working on a science project involving symbiosis, although interestingly the project didn't involve a lot of mutually beneficial partnership. The teacher had forbidden the class from talking, with one finger threateningly directed towards the pair as particularly exempt from teamwork.

It was summer and the classroom was swelteringly hot, Joyce was feeling almost claustrophobic with the huge frame of James Hopper sat next to her. They were sixteen and had fallen into the sort of relationship that only exists between people who have known each other their whole lives. Jim had bulked up from playing on the school football team and he had also started smoking. Joyce had started to tease him the semester before for always smelling like a sweaty smoke butt with cheap cologne. Despite her teasing she couldn't help the turn of her eyes at the sight of the muscles developing under his shirt, and for years afterwards she always attributed the proper smell of a man to a 16 year old Hopper.

With the football territory though came female interest and Hopper had just started seeing Chrissy Carpenter, another thing for which Joyce teased him mercilessly.

'Well I'm sorry Miss, but you sure do take up a hell of a lot of room for such a small skinny thing' he whispered back.

He was rewarded with a quick but forceful punch to the bicep 'Ow!' He said theatrically.

'You have some power in there, I wonder where you're hiding all that muscle, must be in that ass of yours'

He leant back on his stool and made a show of staring lecherously at her rear. Joyce was glowering at him through her electric blue eyeliner. He shrugged and leant back onto the table. 'Nope' he said; 'That's just as scrawny as the rest of you, I'm not even sure I found your butt'

'Jim, I swear to God, leave my ass out of this. You take up at least ten times the room of any normal human'

'Are you calling me a super..human?' He flexed his bicep and winked at her.

'No, I'm calling you freakishly abnormal, like Frankenstein's monster or something, and don't waste your muscle flexes on me. Chrissy will appreciate them much more'

'Hmm 'k.' Hopper mused and he went back to doodling on his pad. Unseen to him Joyce's eyes flicked to his arms through the cover of her bangs and then back to the work in front of her. A small puff of air escaped her as she desperately tried to concentrate. They were supposed to find examples of symbiotic relationships in nature, but Hopper was in one of his moods that regularly demanded all the attention of the people around him. She found him extremely frustrating when he was like this, and oddly magnetic.

Hopper was watching Joyce read the pages in front of her. She was surly today, and he liked it when she was tempestuous. There was something wild about her on days like these, especially if someone foolishly tried to pick a fight with him or their friends. Joyce was fiercely loyal, and had delivered more than one structural injury to a jocks face. Impulsively he reached out and kicked her, landing a solid blow to the side of her calf. He smiled as she whipped her head back towards him, her eyes aflame;

'What the fuck, Hop?!'

He smiled down at her and shrugged.

'You are such a moron' she said as she rested her elbow on his forearm and pressed down with as much force as she could. Hop winced with pain and grabbed her arm with his free hand, she looked up at him with a smug expression on her face. Hopper felt the now well-worn desire of doing something to that small face looking up at him. He'd never clarified what that thing was, sometimes it was tinged with affection, and others with the urge to pull her hair. They stared at each other for a few seconds, and as it lengthened Joyce became aware of the beads of sweat trickling down her back. The smile was slowly slipping off Jim's face and turning into an expression of earnestness. Joyce couldn't bear the strength of his gaze so she said smiling venomously; 'you deserved that'.

'And what did Mr Hopper deserve Joyce Hughes?' Their Science teacher asked accusingly from the end of their desk.

'Nothing Sir, other than a fail' Joyce replied.

'I see, and what will you two be basing your project on, perhaps you'd like to share with the rest of the class?

Joyce smiled sweetly and replied; 'I thought we'd use our friendship Sir as the inspiration and do the project on whales and pilot fish, you know, on account of the fact that Hopper looks like a beached sperm whale.'

Some in the class chuckled, although most were amused by the word; 'Sperm'

Somewhat deflated, Mr Wilson told them to sit at opposite ends of the class.

The two spent the rest of the lesson smirking each other.

'So that makes you the leech then right?' Hopper said to her as sauntered over to her after the bell went. 'Except, you're hanging off me for my popularity instead of barnacles?'

'Did it take you forty minutes to come up with that?'

'Yup.' He said grinning.

'Not a bad effort, for you.' She said smiling back at him.

They shuffled out the classroom laden down with paper and books and headed for the lockers.

'So what you doing later? Me and Benny were gonna go and drink a couple of beers down Kerley. Wanna come?' He said as he leant next to her whilst she crammed bits of paper into the bulging chaos of her locker.

'Depends if you're bringing Chrissy with you?'

'Joyce, don't keep going on about that. Why can't you two get along?'

'Because she hates me Hop and it's a real drag.'

'She doesn't hate you.' He said beseechingly. As though to prove her point the universe conspired to drop Chrissy Carpenter on James Hopper's lips after the sentence was barely out of his mouth. Chrissy swung herself around so that Joyce had an excellent view of the back of her head whilst she tongued the quarterback. Joyce rolled her eyes and sighed, letting out a gust of air that blew the tendrils of Chrissy's hair out of her face.

Joyce turned back to what she was doing, waiting for the public display to finish. It always made her sick when people were openly affectionate in public, or in this case conducting a saliva exchange programme.

Jim managed to drag himself away from Chrissy's face long enough to say; 'So Joyce, tonight?' Chrissy turned and eyed the small brunette suspiciously.

'Hey Chrissy' Joyce said with a pinched expression.

'Oh Hey Joyce, I didn't see you there.' Saccharine sweet and about as genuine as a strippers rack. 'Are you coming tonight? That's great.' She said in a style that indicated the absolute opposite.

Knowing that she wasn't wanted, and filled with an irrational rage at this girl who disliked her purely because she was friends with the Quarterback, she gave a negative, slammed her locker and walked

away from the couple. Hopper watched her go as long as possible before he was reclaimed by the insistent and seeking mouth of Chrissy.

Knocking on the front door of the cabin brought Hopper back to his senses, the comforting routine of spelling out 'Us', called him out the past and back into the present. The door swung open with invisible hands as always, and the smell of food made his stomach rumble.

Eleven was sitting at the table waiting for him, she was evidently surprised at him being home on time. Giving him a small smile she said to him; 'The food's warm'. Hopper smiled and sat himself down; 'Well there's a first time for everything, right?'

They ate in companionable silence, followed by their now common argument of whether they were having dessert. Hopper was trying to avoid temptation and Eleven kept making marshmallows shoot across the room and hit him in the face. He whined at her; 'Come on honey cut me some slack, I've gotta lose some weight, I can barely get in the cab of my patrol car.'

At this Eleven desisted her barrage of mallow missiles and mumbled; 'Fine.'

He leant over and ruffled her hair; 'So I've got some news.' He pulled the envelope out his pocket and laid it out on the table in front of the young girl. She looked at him quizzically whilst she pulled the slip of paper out, and then stared at it in silence. Hopper looked at her expectantly and when she didn't say anything he asked; 'Do you know what that is?'

Eleven shook her head at him. 'It's a birth certificate, Dr Owens had it made up for us. It's yours, that's your new name if you want it?'

It took several seconds for her to reply; 'Jane Hopper?' but that's your surname?'

He smiled at her; 'Uh huh, it can be yours too if you want it?'

'I would belong to you?' She asked, almost fiercely.

'No, it means that we would be family, like Jonathan and Will share

the same surname, and Mike and Nancy.'

'Family' She said to no one in particular. Suddenly she looked up at him with tears in her eyes; 'So you'll be my Papa?'

'I think we need to retire that word kid, but yeah I'll be your Dad, your old man, Pop, whatever you want to call me. As long as it ain't mouth breather ok?'

Eleven got up and launched herself at Hopper, wrapping those small but powerful arms around him, and he heard her say muffled in the crook of his neck; 'Pop'.

Smiling to himself he said; 'Ok maybe you can call me mouth breather every now and again, but only if I deserve it.'

## 4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4 – 'Curiouser and Curiouser'.

He dropped off Eleven at The Snow Ball with strict instructions to be back outside by ten. She was trembling with nerves and anticipation. Despite his distaste at her being so exposed in public, he knew she would be well protected by Wheeler and the other kids. They were strangely resourceful those geeks.

He waited as Eleven looked out of the window towards the distant thrum of music. Despite harassing him for a year about going outside she seemed strangely reluctant to get out of the cab, he smiled at her fondly; 'Go on, get out of here. You look great, just enjoy yourself and if anyone beats up on ya, throw them in the punch.'

Eleven smiled tremulously at him and Hopper dragged her into an embrace. She struggled playfully and complained about her hair.

'Sorry Princess, it still looks good', he said as he smoothed it down and planted a kiss on her head. 'Now get out of here.'

Instead of driving off he decided to have a quick smoke in the parking lot, just in case something troubled her. As he wandered through the darkness he spotted Joyce illuminated by a single street light. She was perched on the hood of her car and hugging herself. He was pretty sure that it wasn't just to do with the cold, his heart and pretty much every other internal organ he owned twisted at the sight of her. Looking at her now with the unflattering fluorescent light beaming down on her and the tension held in every ligament on her body, he began wondering when she had become so anxious, so highly strung. She had always exuded a buzzing sort of energy but eventually life had turned it inwards. The strain of juggling herself and two children meant she got forgetful, she gave up any real thought of her appearance and kept herself to herself.

But in Hopper's mind all she did was prioritise. She wasn't scatter brained, she just forgot everything that didn't relate to her children. All else became secondary to supporting Will and Jonathan. Hell, wasn't that what Hopper had been doing? Prioritising a need for self-

preservation by indulging in the baser instincts, so that he could numb the past. He admired her for the ability to focus on what was important and not lose her principles in the process, like he had.

He supposed that the change in her had come along somewhere around the time Lonnie had begun to exert his influence. He had noticed it when Lonnie and Joyce started dating just before the end of high school, but he had discovered the extent of their tempestuous relationship when he'd returned from the city. Lonnie hadn't been a violent man, he had never hit her, but what a man doesn't do with his fists he can effectively do with threats and derogatory remarks. There had been more than one item of broken furniture in their home, which neither could afford to replace. It had broken her spirit over the years until there was a shadow of the old Joyce Hughes in her place.

But every woman reaches a point at which they break, and for Joyce it had been when Will was four. He had been in the Hospital, a respiratory problem that the doctors had misdiagnosed as Asthma. Will had been there for a couple of days with Joyce sleeplessly watching over him. Lonnie had failed to show, citing a conference in another town. It was only when she had returned home with a fragile Will and Lonnie had turned up stinking of moonshine and stale perfume, that she had confronted him about where he had been. If is his poorly orchestrated lies hadn't have given the game away, the smudged lipstick on his collar did. Something snapped in her then, suddenly she'd had enough of the womanising, the late nights, him spending the small amount of spare cash they had and his disinterested attitude towards his children. Sure, life for Joyce would be harder without him there, but the thought of staying with him had suddenly become unbearable. She mustered up the remaining strength left to her and physically threw him from the house, he had been too surprised to react when he found himself out in the cold, staring at the wrong side of their front door. He more than made up for it in the following weeks by constantly calling the house, hanging around outside in the darkness of the night, and trying to break down the door with an axe. It had been bad enough that Hopper's predecessor had mentioned the domestics down at the Byers place during his handover.



There was enough of the old Joyce in there not to give a damn about what people thought about her, what did hurt was the old-fashioned town judging her when she finally kicked useless Lonnie Byers out. The people of Hawkins still cared enough to judge a single woman trying to raise her children and overlooked the pain that the innocents in the family went through to maintain the image of the wholesome American dream. It had jarred and infuriated Hopper to hear it all, but his duties in the days and weeks that followed had directed his efforts elsewhere. Looking at her now, he realised how selfish he had been, leaving an old friend to suffer without any support from a friendly face.

His simple 'Hey' was enough to make her jump. She looked tired like she was worn through, but the determination was etched into every line of her face.

She smiled warmly when she realised it was him; 'Hey.'

'Why aren't you in there with all those other parents, pretending they haven't seen their snotty kids share awkward-ass kisses?'

Smiling guiltily, she said; 'Will wanted some space, so I gave him a few feet.'

They both chuckled and Hopper offered her a cigarette. As he settled in beside her he could feel an element of her warmth through his jacket. They spoke about one of their old teachers catching them both smoking and he laughed as she choked on his cigarette, nothing ever changed. She would always be that teenage girl to him, even after all these years she really couldn't hack his cigarettes. He didn't want to break the mood but he asked anyway;

'How you holding up?'

He looked at her out the corner of his eye as she replied. He didn't want her to feel forced to answer, but she spoke with a quavering voice about mourning Bob, and picking up the pieces of her life. He pulled her in for a hug, wrapping his arm over her shoulder and shielding her from the cold. Reflexively she took hold of the hand over her shoulder, and he felt a jolt run through him that he couldn't explain. He supposed it was guilt.

'I'm sorry, I should have come over to see you guys, I might be dealing with a twelve-year-old hormone who can move crap with her mind but I am here for you all.'

Joyce laughed, but it was hollow;

'Honestly Hop, I figured you had enough to deal with, and I've got to get through this myself. If I don't I'll be scared for the rest of my life.' She flicked the ash from her cigarette with venom, she didn't like admitting to weakness even with Hop.

He spoke into her hair as he replied; 'You don't have to do this yourself, that's the point. You've been doing that for years. We all got through this together, whatever nightmares or PTSD shit we get from this, we get through it together, you, me, and the all those kids.'

Joyce didn't want to admit how good it felt to have him say that, she had loved Bob's dependability and his unquestioning loyalty but with Hopper she felt like a team, not a woman being supported by a caring man. She had hated the idea of being a dependent woman since she realised having a man wasn't an precursor to security. They sat there together for a long time in silence, staring into the distance. It was a quiet form of therapy.

Hopper felt strangely content and still as he sat there, he didn't know if it was the fact that he was holding a woman for the first time in a long time that wasn't a sexual embrace, but as he turned his head to look down at her, any cold he might have felt on that December night was entirely dispelled by the warmth of her gaze as she smiled up at him. He couldn't look away from the promise in those eyes.

'What is this?', he wondered to himself as she continued to smile at him. Did she expect him to say something? He started to feel very hot, but the heat was internal rather than their shared body warmth. He could feel a magnetic pull towards her, his body urging him to bring their heads together and experience something more profound. With a shock that reverberated to his core he realised he wanted to kiss her, not with the fumbling inaccuracies of their teenage years, but with all the experience and skill he had stored within him. 'I thought I was over this, why is this happening now?' he thought as his hands fought the urge to bring her closer. As he blinked in

confusion Joyce murmured; 'Thanks Hop. Will you come over with Eleven for Christmas?'

Two conflicting thoughts hit him at once, the spell that had been working its way through him was suddenly broken, he tried to lift his head back to a more platonic position. He agreed without thinking to her invitation, suddenly the idea of spending more time with her was no longer an enjoyable occurrence to be savoured, but immediately necessary. He would work out the logistics of getting Eleven to their house later. Needing to disengage to think his feelings, he told her that he had to get back to the station. He thought he noted a slight expression of disappointment in her face, and he thought again about trying to kiss her. Pushing the feeling away for now, he tried to maintain his friendly demeanour by making her promise that she would call should she need him.

Driving back to the station Hopper thought about his relationship with Joyce. He could somehow always bend a person to his will, either through charm, intimidation, anger or as a last resort his fists. It was different with Joyce. He'd lost count over the years of how many times they'd fought and she would shove him the chest with those small hands. Nobody argued with James Hopper, except Joyce Byers who always ground him into submission. What had that been back there? He thought he had left the thought of a relationship with her far behind him, but all it had taken was that one touch of her hand on his to send him reeling backwards. No that wasn't entirely true, he had felt it before tonight. When she had rescued him from those vines, the touch of her hand on his face and the insistent, desperate look in her eyes. He couldn't resist then to reach out and touch her arm, revelling in the feel of her.

He was in trouble, he knew that now. When he hadn't been head first into the abyss as he had been in high school, he was skirting around it. All it would take was one gesture from her, and he would drop all pretence of platonic friendship. James Hopper would always be drawn to Joyce Byers, she was celestial motion, and he moved with her.

'Mrs Carlisle won't like to see you up in that tree.'

'Well you ought not to tell her then.' Was the curt response of a slender girl with Chestnut hair. She was perched up in the bough of a

tree on the outskirts of the school playing field.

The boy looked up her, having to squint in the mid-day sun. 'And why should I not tell her? That's my tree you're in'

'I don't see your name on it'

'You don't know my name, so you wouldn't know.' He said smugly.

'I sure do. You're Jimmy Hopper, and I've never seen you in this tree.'

'Come on down now, or I'll tell Mrs Carlisle.' He said, slightly dumbstruck by her knowledge.

'You won't.' She said as a matter of fact.

'I will.'

Joyce climbed down from the bough, scowling at the boy in front of her as she smoothed down her dress. She was wearing pink but there were grass strains on her elbows and her hair was slightly wild. He tried to look authoritative by putting his hands on his hips and scowling right back at her. If he was hoping to intimidate her it didn't work. She marched straight up to him and kicked him in the leg. He fell to the floor, rolling around in agony as he clutched his shin.

'That's what you get for being a bully Jimmy Hopper. I ain't done nothing to you, why would you threaten to go tell?'

Jimmy yelled out; 'My daddy said girls shouldn't climb trees, it ain't right he said.'

Stood over him and shaking in anger, she said to him; 'Well you tell your Daddy that as I ain't hurting nobody, I'll do as I please. Just because I'm a girl, don't mean I can't do what boys do!'

He said nothing in response but lay prone in front of her. She continued trembling with rage; 'Does it Jimmy Hopper?'

Hopper looked up at the girl looming over him, and said; 'No ma'am'

'Well you better get up then, and stop that bawling.'

Jimmy dragged himself to his feet and rather than looking at the girl in front of him, he decided to forlornly inspect the red mark on his shin. The bell started to ring, and the hordes of children scattered over the field started to drift back towards school.

The girl looked toward the school, her hair blustering around her face. She looked back to James and said; 'Bet I could out run you!'

Little James Hopper puffed out his chest as he said to her;

'Now I know I can faster than you.'

After determining the prize which was of course the lookout tree, and the consolation prize of the tree next to it, which was just as fine but didn't have as good a view of the field. The competition was on, they designated a starting line and James was allowed to do the countdown. He breathlessly shouted; '3, 2, 1!' Competitiveness making his heart flutter, and they sprinted across the field.

At first James saw that the vision to his left was completely free of girls, he started to hoot in triumph before he was halfway to the finishing line. With pride comes a fall, and James Hopper had experienced a lot in a very short space of time. The girl drew level with him, looked him straight in the eye and smirked at him. She then took off at a furious pace, leaving James Hopper in the dust.

When he reached the finishing line she was there waiting for him, her arms crossed and a smug smile on her face. She reached her hand out to him to shake though, which he took reluctantly.

'So, what are you gonna be when you're older Jimmy Hopper?'

'A soldier.' It was said with some zeal, but also a touch of hesitation. It had obviously unnerved him to find his physical prowess demeaned by a female.

'Well you gonna need to train if you want to be in the Army, and you tell your Daddy that a girl beat you today.' The girl then turned on her heel and marched off, with a dumbstruck expression he called after her; 'What's your name?'

That night at home, James Hopper wasn't brave enough to tell

anyone that he was beaten twice by Joyce Hughes.

It took him a week to pluck up the courage to speak to her again. When he did she was back in her rightfully claimed tree looking down on him with suspicion.

'I'm sorry about what I said. Girls can do whatever they want to do.' He said as he looked at his shoes.

She observed him intently for a moment, shrugged her shoulders and said; 'You're forgiven'

He looked up in surprise, and a blush crept up his cheeks as he continued excitedly; 'I don't know why I listen to my Dad, he always says ladies can't do anything but my Mum does everything at home.'

Joyce nodded decidedly; 'Same at my house, although my Mom always whispers to me; Want a job doing well, ask a woman.'

'Do you want to come up here?', she asked him after a moment. Jimmy nodded fervently and climbed up to join her. They spent the whole of recess discussing their parents and what they wanted to be when they grew up. That night James Hopper went home and told his mother that he was going to marry Joyce Hughes. She smiled at him with a sad wistfulness; 'I see, she's a nice girl but you remember that life has a habit of getting in the way of those plans Jimmy.'

That phrase rung in Hopper's mind as he slammed the door of his blazer shut.

## 5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5 - 'In a Wonderland they lie, Dreaming as the days go by'

Christmas was always chaos in the Byers Household despite the relatively low numbers. Will would be a buzzing ball of energy, always hoping to help his mother but so excited that he would generally mess up his tasks. Jonathan would be getting underfoot taking photographs, and Chester, well Chester would snatch meat from the counter as soon as Joyce turned her back. She had to have eyes in three places at the best of times, let alone at Christmas when everyone was excited.

Joyce would generally work every hour available for the month leading up to Christmas Day so that she could afford to give the boys the holiday they deserved. This year there was more expense, and more gifts to buy. After her invitation to Hop, she had spent the next few days thinking about what gifts to buy him and Eleven. She wanted to say thank you to Hopper for the past year, her family simply wouldn't have survived without him. As for Eleven, it was her first Christmas free from the influence of the Lab and her biting winter of isolation. Joyce wanted to provide the young girl with an experience that would make up for those years, it was a daunting task, both for Hopper and Joyce though they had not actively discussed it. There also remained the small matter of buying Eleven some gifts that she was sure Hopper had not even considered.

She had spent a good two hours in the store selecting clothes for Eleven that she thought she would like, books, magazines, and a little discreet make up. She also considered that Eleven may soon venture into womanhood, but that was a bridge they would cross when it materialised. Hopper was trickier, the only things she knew that he liked for certain were cigarettes and alcohol. After worrying about it for some time, and too fearful to ask the boys in case of questioning looks she decided to call Eleven.

She felt foolish asking Hopper's recently adopted daughter what he would like for Christmas when Joyce had known him most of her life. Asking a girl who wasn't known for her social awareness didn't seem like a great idea, but at least she could keep a look out for what he

liked.

The phone was answered almost immediately, Eleven must be bored stuck in that Cabin, she thought with a pang.

'Hi Pop.', The delicate voice said on the other end of the line.

'Hi Sweetie, it's Joyce.'

'Mrs Byers!', The voice was filled with even more enthusiasm.

'How are you? I hope you're not too bored up there?'

Eleven was still relatively monosyllabic, evidently, she was still getting used to the idea of being able to use her voice, what she didn't say she more than made up for in the general enthusiasm with which she said it.

'No, I'm excited about Christmas, thank you.'

'You're welcome hon, I'm excited to see you. That's the reason I called actually, I um. Can you think of anything that Hopper would like for Christmas?' She said in a self-conscious rush.

'Like?' Said Eleven.

'I don't know, I want to buy him a gift to say thank you, but I don't know what he would like, or whether he needs anything?'

Joyce could hear Eleven chewing on her lip, she was silent for several moments.

'You don't have to tell me right now, maybe you could have a look around and see whether anything needs mending, or replacing?'

'Ok, I'll look' She said in puzzlement, and hung up the phone.

As she put the phone down she stared around the cabin. She liked a challenge, particularly one that was related to the traditions of her new world. She remembered when Hopper had bought home a Rubik's Cube that was in the lost and found box at the station. She had completed it in minutes and it had given her the confidence to



try everything she could get her hands on. This gift giving seemed like a nice idea, and she spent the next hour looking everywhere in the cabin for the things that Joyce had described until she found her Eureka moment. Looking through their newly expanded address book, Eleven dialled out the Byers telephone number carefully.

Will answered;

'Hi Eleven! How are you!?'

'Um, good. You?' She said shyly.

'Yeah, much better thanks', his voice moved away from the receiver and she heard a faint cough. Hopper had told her about the symptoms.

'You're still coughing?'

'Doctor Owens said I would, I have bad lungs from when I was young. It'll take a while to get back to normal.'

'Oh Ok.' She said simply.

'How are the nightmares?' He said quietly down the phone. She had confided in him on their last movie night that she was suffering from crippling nightmares of the lab and the Upside Down, Will had confessed that he was too, he had been unable to go to Castle Byers because it upset him too much. Since then, he always asked her how she was doing. She didn't mind him asking, it was nice to be able to talk to someone who had seen the same things as she had.

'Not as much, but still bad.'

'Me too', he said simply. The line was quiet for a moment, both thinking on their own personal demons.

'Do you wanna speak to Mom?' He said finally.

'Yes please.'

Will shouted out into the background and then said to Eleven; 'See you at Christmas El.'

'I'm excited, bye.'

He laughed, and shouted his goodbye as Joyce's voice came over the receiver.

'He needs new work boots; the others are falling apart.'

'Thanks Eleven, that's perfect.'

'Oh and he likes this music, by a man named Jim Croce.'

Eleven could hear Joyce's smile through the phone; 'Ah yes, I couldn't forget that. Thanks, I'll get the boots from somewhere.'

'Ok,' Was Eleven's simple reply.

'I've already got your gifts, so you don't need to think of anything else.' Joyce said kindly.

'Gifts? For me?'

'Well sure, I've never been able to buy gifts for a girl before, it was fun. Maybe when you're allowed out I could take you shopping sometime?'

This information was too much for Eleven to handle, her eyes went wide and she stuttered down the phone, struggling to get all her responses out at once;

'Thanks, for me? Shopping? Yes Please, thank you for my gifts.'

Joyce laughed sweetly; 'You're more than welcome, now you just have to wait two weeks for Christmas Day, do you think you manage that without exploding from excitement?'

'Yes', Eleven said, but she certainly didn't sound convinced.

The next day Joyce popped into the Station to find out where to get suitable work boots for Hop. It was almost empty. Joyce blew a sigh of relief, she had purposefully taken an earlier break so that she would avoid seeing anyone before people returned for lunch. Joyce was in search of the omnipotent station matriarch.

Flo looked entirely unsurprised to see Joyce in front of her, covered in melting flakes of snow.

'Hot drink dear? You look frozen.' Was her opening.

Joyce looked undecided for a moment, unconsciously ruffling her hair and moving from foot to foot.

'How long will the Chief be?'

Flo pursed her lips in a smile and looked at the paperwork in front of her. 'Hmm, by my reckoning another hour or so.'

That decided it, Joyce sat down in the seat opposite Flo. The older lady got herself up and bustled around the old kitchen. Shortly afterwards she placed a steaming cup of Coffee in front of the brown-haired icicle.

Only then did the business-like expression of managerial Flo take over from the kind-hearted expression of an older lady.

'Thanks for the drink Mrs Jefferies.'

'You're welcome Dear, now what can I do for you?' She said over her half-rimmed glasses.

'Well, Hopper is alone again this Christmas' She began; 'and he's been so supportive with Will that I wanted to invite him to ours this year, and it didn't feel right not getting him a present. I think he needs a new pair of work boots, but I don't know where I can buy them. Do you think you could help me?'

The last part came out in a rush, and a new warmth burnt her cheeks as she tried to sound as casual as she could.

Flo raised her eyebrows as high as they could possibly go without disappearing into her hairline. That Joyce Byers had noticed the state of his boots was surely an indication that they were intimate. Where else would a woman better see a man's boots than sitting at the threshold of his house, or hers? Flo recovered quickly, and restored her best Poker face.

'Well that's very kind of you, he's been needing some for a while. I can order them in to be delivered here if you like? You can collect them when they get here?'

'That would be perfect thank you!' Joyce enthused in relief.

Now that the business was over with, Flo settled back in her chair and assessed Joyce over her glasses. There was silence between the two, as Joyce smiled nervously between sips of her coffee. The CIA really had missed a trick by not hiring Flo as a senior interrogator, the older lady instinctively knew how to draw out a silence to the extreme discomfort of her victim. Joyce could feel the gaze of Flo through her bones, the intense stare was not confrontational, but discerning enough so that Joyce feel the heat of embarrassment in every pore. The brunette hardly knew why she felt uncomfortable, just as a Police Officer could make a person feel guilty in innocence, Flo could manipulate the surroundings in the same way.

Flo's silent interrogation was interrupted by the entrance of Powell, who stamped the snow from his boots and sarcastically doffed his cap to the ladies.

'Well Mrs Byers, it sure is a pleasure.'

Joyce jumped up, and in a fluster mumbled her hello's and goodbyes in the shortest sentence imaginable. The door had closed before Powell could possibly get any more sarcastic remarks in, he did manage however a sardonic smile at the closed door of the station.

Flo raised a warning finger towards the officer and said; 'Not a word.'

It turned out that Flo's CIA intimidation techniques worked just effectively on law enforcement personnel.

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Christmas Day dawned, for some it was earlier than others. When Hopper left his bedroom, he was met by the image of a ram rod straight Eleven sitting on the couch staring at him. He could see the excitement held in every limb of her body, he was sure that if he had been five minutes later she would have removed him from his bed by

psychic force. He grinned at the sight of her, she had obviously taken a great deal of care getting herself ready.

'When will you be ready?' She said, almost accusingly.

He chuckled and said; 'It's 7am kiddo, I know it's Christmas but I don't think the Byers will appreciate us turning up before breakfast. That's bad manners.'

Eleven deflated, fell back into the couch crossing her arms and muttering 'Bad manners' like they were dirty words.

Hopper made his way over to the kitchenette and started brewing himself some coffee. He could only see the back of her head, but he knew she was still sulking. As he made his way back several minutes later, he plastered a hurt accent to his voice and said to her; 'It's almost like you're not interested the presents I got you.' As he threw himself into the chair opposite and surveyed her.

Her eyes immediately went wide, she sat up and started to look around the room like an alert Meerkat.

'Presents' She whispered, 'But where?'

'That's what those shiny boxes are under the tree.'

Eleven saw the pile of wrapped objects under the tree and suddenly felt very guilty that none of those were for Hopper. As he saw the look on her face, he immediately sat forward and grabbed her hand; 'Hey, what's wrong?'

Eleven looked at the floor and tearfully explained that she hadn't bought anything for him.

'Hey, It's ok. You're cooped up in this cabin twenty-four hours a day, how could you get me anything? You're pretty special, but you ain't a Wizard. Besides, this is for you. I'll get more enjoyment out watching you open these than having anything of my own.'

She gave him a wobbly smile, and squeezed his hand. Hopper looked toward the pile and tilted his head; 'Now. Mush.'

The next half an hour was filled with shouts of delight from the young girl, Hopper had poured every missed opportunity of his past into this Christmas. He knew he had spoilt her despite his absolute hatred of spoilt kids, but he really couldn't help himself. It had been worth the three-hour trek out of town to pick things out for her. He only wished he could have taken her without arising suspicion.

The biggest surprise of all, although it happened to be the most amusing for him was watching Eleven try to voice her thanks for the waffle iron he had bought her, without her having a clue of what it was. He spent ten minutes making her guess what it was for. Two minutes being squeezed to death by her, half an hour making the batter and producing her first batch of waffles, and an hour of clearing up the mess. By the that time, it was time to get ready to leave. Eleven was practically hopping by the door as she waited for Hopper to put on his boots and coat.

Hopper was jittery as he knocked on the door of the Byers, not because of the sheer amount of noise coming from within, but the prospect of spending a whole day with Joyce. He wondered if she would catch onto his feelings and suddenly find it all too intimate, too domestic. However as soon as she opened the door and she threw her arms out to Eleven, any awkwardness he might have felt dissipated watching Joyce hugging his little girl. Joyce bestowed upon him one of her smiles that indicated she was entirely trouble free for the day. Her hair was wild and her movements rapid as usual, but there was a firmness to her expression.

Will and Jonathan were waiting for the guests in ambush with Jonathan's camera, both were subjected to several flashes of piercing white light. 'Jeez, you trying to blind me Kid?' Hopper said, blinking furiously.

A small crooked smile appeared in the corner of Jonathan's mouth, Hopper was never sure if that kid was toeing the line, or waiting for the next opportunity to commit an infraction of varying seriousness.

Despite this, Hopper reached out and Jonathan met the offered handshake.

Will gave no sign of approaching Hopper but looked up at the Chief

with a mixture of awe and adoration. Eleven had told him about shooting the demi-dogs, and coupled with the man's kindness towards him, Will had become an avid fan of the Chief of Police. It always amused Joyce to see Will interact with Hopper.

'Hi Chief' said Will with a giant smile.

'Hi kid, how you feeling?' Hopper said as he patted Will's shoulder.

'Mhmm', Will said nodding and smiling.

Hopper chuckled and ruffled the boy's hair. Eleven moved shyly forward, now that the flash of the camera had subsided, she could see the beautiful Christmas lights and decorations. The idea that someone went to so much effort for no other practical purpose than to give pleasure was overwhelming for the girl. Hopper smiled at her affectionately until he realised that he had left all the gifts in the truck. He returned, laden with objects and in the short time he had been gone, he found Eleven and Will playing computer games and laughing at his daughter's poor performance.

He found Jonathan and Joyce in the kitchen pottering over small tasks, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt and smacking his hands together he asked; 'So what you got for me to do Chief?'

Joyce laughed as she replied; 'You've eaten my food Hop, I'm not a Chief. I'm the guy that cleans the toilets.'

He wrinkled his nose in disgust; 'I don't think we'll all fit in your bathroom, and this year you have helpers who have control over their opposable thumbs.'

They all contributed, Eleven even managed to save them all from a catastrophe as Hopper nearly dropped the turkey putting it back in the oven. It gracefully flew from his outstretched hands and onto the table.

Joyce laughed and kissed the top of Eleven's head as the turkey landed with a gentle thud, she then shot a fake accusatory scowl towards Hopper.

'Control of your opposable thumbs huh.'

Dinner was noisy, everyone spoke over each other. Eleven was asking about Will computer games, as he feeding Chester under the table, Jonathan was berating him for feeding the dog. Hopper was trying to use Jonathan's camera, prompting some furtive glances and suggestions from the owner about the relative merit of separating technology and mashed potatoes from people who had recently proven themselves to be pretty clumsy. Joyce was trying to shoo away Chester and berate Will, whilst Christmas music blared from the living room.

After dinner was presents, also presided over by extreme noise. Hopper had out done himself, for Jonathan he had bought rolls of film and developing paper for his photography, for Will there was a huge set of drawing supplies and a jumper that was so warm it resembled a ski suit, Will had to take it off within five minutes of putting it on.

'For your chest', Hopper said simply.

Joyce unwrapped her first gift, inside the paper was a key holder made from a beautiful piece of polished wood. Joyce ran her hands over the silken grain of the wood, and as she admired the colour she laughed softly. She was always losing her keys, this might just save her about fifteen minutes of frantic searching in the morning.

'It's made from a branch of that tree we fought over, you know, when we first met and you were a complete bully.'

Joyce looked up at him with a look of childhood fondness; 'Hop, it's wonderful thank you.'

He smiled at her and shrugged his shoulders before looking away bashfully.

Her second gift proved to be a bottle of perfume that she had always loved, but could not always afford. Hopper had a strange attachment to that scent on her, it was the sort of smell that attracted him on a primeval level, the sort of fragrance that you wanted to breathe in until your lungs burst. He had noticed when he came back from the City that she no longer wore it. He couldn't forget the bottle, it was always sat on her dressing table of her bedroom which was always



the first thing he saw when he climbed up to her window with an emergency bottle of beer when they were teenagers.

Joyce squealed in delight, and opening the packaging she spritzed some onto her wrist, smelling the aroma with a look of ecstasy on her face. Leaning forward she grabbed Hopper's hand and squeezed it, he found it difficult to look at her whilst she gave him her thanks, the perfume wafting around her coupled with her gaze were intoxicating.

In the Afternoon, the boys and Max arrived marshalled by Nancy, shivering with the cold. Organised chaos then gave way entirely to carnage. As soon as Mike arrived, Eleven naturally gravitated to his side. Hopper found the seriousness of their relationship unnerving, he often watched them, and in a way, he envied them. They had the warmth of a first attachment, coupled with the maturity that only adversity can bring. Many relationships including his own had broken down at the first sign of hardship, whereas they had become stronger. Everyone was interested to hear about Eleven's adoption and her new name, although it did cause some consternation amongst the boys.

'Jane?' the boys said, wrinkling their noses in dislike.

'Jane?' Mike said at her incredulously. Eleven was starting to feel hurt at their dislike of her name until Dustin interjected excitedly, smacking the arms of Lucas and Will next to him; 'Hey! Hey! We can call her Jane Grey!'

Lucas cocked his head to one side; 'Like, as in Jean Grey. From X-Men?'

'Yeah!' Dustin said loudly; 'She's the Phoenix!'

Eleven wasn't entirely sure what they were talking about but it sounded much better. The boys declared this acceptable and moved onto arguing about which movie they would watch. Jonathan and Nancy had suspiciously disappeared.

'Fancy a smoke?' Joyce offered as she passed Hopper another beer.

'Sure', he replied, pulling himself up from the couch.

As they stood outside in the freezing cold, their frigid breath

mingling with the smoke neither really knew what to say. It was a companionable silence, there was no awkwardness as they passed the bottle of beer between them, besides the quiet was allowing the dull roaring in his ears to subside.

'It's been a funny ol' year.' He said, to no one in particular after a while.

Joyce puffed out a stream of smoke and turned her eyes skyward; 'Yeah, here I was last year thinking that my life might be heading towards normality. I won't make that mistake this year.'

He looked at her with sympathy and said; 'I never thought Hawkins would be a place I could term as unpredictable but maybe Me and You ought to expect the unexpected.'

'Maybe', she said still staring at the sky. 'Do you remember that we used to do this a lot down by the Lake? We would just stare up at the sky and talk about all the plans we had?'

'Yeah', he said as he looked up with her. 'The Universe had different plans.' His voice altered and cracked imperceptibly. Stubbing out his cigarette abruptly, he went indoors.

Seeing the sudden change Joyce followed him, she had been there thinking about her losses, when Hopper had lost something infinitely dearer. He had borne it for longer, and no one had been there to support him.

She caught up with him in the lounge and gently grabbing his forearm pulled him round to her. She reached up and cupped his cheek, her fingers almost burned him.

'Are you ok? You're constantly helping other people but I never ask if you're ok?', she said trying to force the truth from him with her eyes.

'Mom, you're under the Miseltoe', said Will. Jonathan, who had miraculously re-appeared, immediately tried to hush him, giving furtive glances at his Mom and Hopper. Eleven tore her eyes away from the TV, initially interested at the idea of an unknown term to add to her vocabulary. What she saw, made her quirk her head. She

looked at them silently, trying to interpret what would happen next. Hopper had heard Will distantly, registering what it meant but he was already far in the moment, looking into the brown eyes below him. His gaze warmed her through as she looked up at him, and she was suddenly transported back to those vines, ripping them from his body. She remembered the almost feral panic she felt at finding his body bound, suffocated in that place. Nor could she forget the breathlessness she experienced when he was stood over her again, she remembered clutching at him like he had been the one to rescue her.

She shook her head and smiled with embarrassment at the kids; 'Don't know why I put that up.' She muttered as she placed a hot palm to her forehead. She looked awkwardly up at Hop, he was staring at her with an equal level of confusion, but there was another emotion in there, watching her intently as she began to turn her head to place her lips to his cheek. His hands slipped to her hips and he turned his head in submission to her kiss. It was over in an instant, and the sounds of disgust from all the kids made them laugh. But the feel of his beard on her face and his smell reminded her of her high school boy, something that was coiled within her relaxed imperceptibly, and then tensed again as he moved away.

Awkwardly clearing his throat and patting his legs like he lost his keys rather than his equilibrium he said; 'I'm gonna get another drink.', and fled to the kitchen.

The kids continued to raucously make vomit and kissing noises, before turning back to the TV. Eleven immediately started to make enquiries as to the meaning of the magical plant that made adults act weird. Frustratingly, each answer she received was contradictory. Nancy smiled coquettishly and sighed without answering. Dustin made extremely loud vomit noises, whilst Lucas flexed his arms towards Max. The only sensible answer was of course from Will;

'It's a weird tradition at Christmas, adults put them up to give them the confidence to kiss other adults that they normally wouldn't have.'

Eleven furrowed her brows in her confusion; 'So why would Mrs Byers put it up?'

Will shrugged; 'It wasn't up there yesterday.'

Eleven's suspicions were starting to formulate with the certainty of a sledgehammer, but she was unsure of voicing them to Will, who might not welcome them. She scooted close and whispered to him;

'Do you think your Mom likes my Dad? You know, like she wanted confidence?'

An expression of realisation dawned on the boy's face, he started to tap Eleven's arm intensely; 'Oh my God, Oh my God.' As he watched his mother and the Chief of Police desperately attempt to avoid each other.

'Why didn't I notice that!?'

'Are you angry about it?', Eleven asked shyly.

Will sat for several minutes in contemplation, Eleven had to give him credit for seriously considering his feelings on the subject, even if she was desperate to have the suspense relieved. Will continued to stare at the adults, as well as look around his house before turning to Eleven and smiling widely.

'No I'm not angry, I actually think it would be pretty cool.'

Eleven smiled back at him, the only thing now was to hatch a plan on forcing the adults together.

The rest of the day's festive revelry was enjoyed by the majority of the group, Nancy had bought Twister with her which took up the good view of the TV that Hopper was studiously gluing his eyes too. Joyce relaxed after a while but she found herself thinking again and again about those vines twisting around him, trying to rip them from him with almost feral panic and the sheer relief, the feel of her fingers in his beard.

But Bob had been there before with the vines, waiting patiently for their moment to be over, and he was with them now.

## 6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6 – 'Birds of a feather, flock together.'

Joyce awoke suddenly to the sound of her own loud and startled breathing. Her hands were twisted up in the sheets, with a film of sweat clinging to her skin. Sitting up and brushing back the damp tendrils of her hair, she sat for several minutes and tried to regulate her breathing.

She had never had a dream so vivid, or been able to recall every sensation. Even now as she sat amongst her clammy sheets the verges of the dream were still intruding. Some night time imaginations fade away as soon as you wake. It was not destined to be that sort of dream.

She had been running down corridors in the dark chasing the sound of footsteps, taking lefts and rights without any apparent change in her environment. She didn't tire, and neither did the person in front, there was only the rising bile of panic in her chest. As she ran she felt a malevolent presence behind her, driving her forward blindly with the breath of the beast at her ear.

The corridors continued endlessly, with no light in front of her. This part of the dream seemed to go on forever, until she abruptly turned a corner and in front of her was a mauled body illuminated by torch light. His back was facing her, and she was spared the expression of his lifeless eyes. At first it she thought of Bob, but with the omniscience of a dreamer she knew that it was Hopper who laid devoid of life in front of her.

She cried out, first in anguish, and then in horror as the thing behind her caught up with her. Her body clenched as she felt a strong grip on her shoulders, but it was not the Demigorgon that had her, it was Hopper, and all of a sudden, she had his face in her hands, running them across the planes of his face, checking for injuries. It was the sound of his voice that unnerved her, he had uttered her name in a way she could only describe as in reverence. It was subdued, but there was a crackle of electricity as he gazed down at her. She had never had a dream move from utter terror to one of knotted sexual

anticipation. She looked at the time and groaned; '4.30AM. Jeez.'

Sleep had utterly fled, and the fluttering in her stomach continued. She got up and wandered to the kitchen to get some water to quell the strange fire within her. Reaching her hand into the ice box, she grabbed a couple of cubes and ran them across her face. She was still running them across her now goose-pimpled flesh when she gave up trying not to look at the telephone, and dialled the familiar number. She chewed at her bottom lip as she waited for the call to connect. They hadn't talked about the incident with the Mistletoe, in fact it had been steadfastly avoided. She kept thinking about it as she twisted the cord round her small hands. She wondered whether he had thought about it all, there had been many times subsequently that she had fallen asleep to the memory of his hands grasping her hips. She huffed in frustration at the thought.

His voice was dry and heavy with the sounds of sleep when he answered; 'Yello?'

Some of the tension in her body dissipated to a relatively small house fire; 'Jim.'

All traces of sleep fled Chief Hopper, and his tone was immediately alert; 'Joyce, what's wrong? Are Will and Jonathan ok?'

'Nothing, nothing. We're fine'.

'Oh.' He said, his beard scratching into the receiver.

'I was actually calling to check up on you.'

'Me?'

'Yeah, I had this really vivid dream and I guess I wanted to check that it hadn't been real. Never mind, it's silly.'

The sound of a soft female voice then rose in the background, and for a mortifying moment Joyce thought it might be a woman.

'Dad, what's happening?'

'Nothing Kiddo, Joyce just called that's all.'

'Are they all ok?', The young girl said, her voice began to quiver with that suppressed power Joyce now noticed whenever there was a question of danger.

'Yeah they're fine little Superhero, no emergency now go back to sleep.'

Joyce started to feel very selfish for calling them, especially as she had woken up Eleven.

'I swear that Kid is going to develop some kind of complex, always wanting to woosh in and save everyone. I caught her wearing a blanket like a cape yesterday.'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called.' She said.

'It's ok, do you want to tell me what it was about?', he asked as he settled himself back on the bed.

'Do you ever have bad dreams about all this?' She asked in response.

He mused for a moment, he didn't want to admit to her that most of his dreams were bad, in one form or another. It was one of the reasons he had become such a heavy drinker.

'Sometimes.' He said reluctantly.

'Oh', Joyce replied somewhat redundantly. Hopper obviously didn't want to elaborate, and it left her feeling strangely hurt at her exclusion from his troubles.

'So, what happened in this dream of yours?', He asked again.

'Uh, we were back in the lab, I was being chased and I found a body, at first I thought it was Bob, but then I somehow knew it was you. It was just really real, you know?'

The last part had come out in a rush, Joyce certainly didn't want to tell him about their embrace. She was embarrassed enough as it was.

Hopper tried to ignore the little flush of hope that Joyce's dream had given him, his default response would have been to tease her, it was

a real struggle to be an adult sometimes.

'I know about vivid dreams, when I got back from Vietnam I used to wake up in the night thinking I was still there, I would shout out orders in my sleep.'

Realising that there was a veritable tombola of potential nightmare material in his life, Joyce felt entirely ashamed.

'I'm sorry Hop, I shouldn't have bothered you with this.'

'You know, you apologise too much Hughes. Besides my dreams have been much better of late. Although I did have a horrible one about McBannon describing his latest prostate exam to me in frightening detail.'

Joyce laughed; 'What, the old guy who you caught shouting at traffic that time?'

'Yup, the very same. Although to be fair, he was in the middle of a diabetic hypo. I'd take him like that over Powell any day. Maybe I'll offer him a job'

Hopper was glad to hear her breathy laugh down the line, he wasn't going to ask but it slipped out of his mouth before he could stop himself;

'Are you ok, or do you want me to come over?'

Suddenly thinking of her dream again, the wave of desperate heat rose again in her chest.

'No!', she said in panic; 'Honestly, I'm fine now Hop, thanks for humouring me.'

Trying to hide the disappointment in his voice he said; 'Ok, well try and get some sleep ok?'

She was about to hang up the phone when Hopper said; 'Oh and Joyce, don't start dreaming about prostates and call me expecting me to listen to that shit ok?'



Laughing she said; 'Ok, I will keep my anus exams to myself.'

The next morning at breakfast, Eleven was being much quieter than normal. Prompted by the late night phone call, she was desperate to ask Hopper about his feelings, the half formed words constantly on her lips.

She and Will had talked about the strange behaviour of their parents, and like all good investigators they decided to confirm their suspicions before formulating a plan. So, Eleven waited until Hopper was half way through a gulp of milk before finally asking;

'Do you love Mrs Byers?'

She was sprayed with a fine mist of milk for her efforts, whilst Hopper choked.

'What are you talking about kid?' He said as he dabbed at the milk on his beard and shirt.

'Do you love Mrs Byers?' She said again, with the benign curiosity of an interrogator who knows they have the guilty party in front of them.

Hopper suddenly became much more interested in drying off the various items of the kitchen table than making eye contact;

'There's different types of love.' He stuttered.

'Yes, like friendship and love when you don't get love returned.' She said almost impatiently; 'There's also family love, and romantic love, and I wanted to know which one you feel for Mrs Byers.'

Jim Hopper stared at his daughter incredulously, this TV education was becoming extremely dangerous. He made a mental note to reduce the amount of time he allowed her to watch it, if he thought for a second he would be more successful than the last time he tried to remove that item from his daughter.

Thoughts on the household reshuffle however didn't stop him floundering with all the grace landed fish.

'Er..um.' He said as he patted and flattened the tablecloth.

Eleven was staring at him mercilessly, willing him to make eye contact, and with a final pathetic pat of the table Hopper looked his daughter in the eye and said weakly; 'She is my... friend.'

There was no response from his daughter other than a disbelieving; 'HMMMM' and a return to her breakfast.

Hopper left shortly afterwards, giving Eleven a shell-shocked pat on the head and a mumbled comment about what time he would be home. He dragged on his coat and left the cabin, with the air of a deer caught in headlights.

## 7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7 – It would be so nice if something made sense for a change.

Eleven had taken to cornering Hopper in confined spaces, asking him in various ingenious disguises about his feelings regarding Joyce Byers. Sometimes she would leave it several days, others several minutes before venturing another question.

'You know, there's nothing wrong with being in love with Mrs Byers. She's very pretty, and you've known her since school.'

Hopper had travelled the full range of emotion in trying to deal with his daughter's machinations. He had been angry, resigned, nervous, at one point he almost wailed as Eleven asked him if he wanted to die alone underneath the bathroom door;

'THIS IS PRIVATE TIME! MEN NEED TIME TO THEMSELVES WHEN THEY USE THE BATHROOM!'

Scrubbing his face with his hands he made a small scream of frustration. There had been no peace in the house since their breakfast conversation, he had started to become jumpy whenever she opened her mouth. Hopper had tried grounding her, threatening to take away the TV, banning Waffles, and her phone calls to Mike. None of it worked, and he knew he couldn't enforce it, he hadn't been assertive enough in answering a young girls innocent question. He also couldn't blame her, Eleven had never had a mother's love, it was natural for her to want one. He ignored the buoyant feeling he experienced when he thought of them all as a family unit. That feeling had been punctured after the 16th question about his failed relationships.

They had just left the Byers's after Eleven's movie night, and she had noticed the new awkwardness between the two adults. She had launched into her questioning before the door of the truck was fully closed.

'So what's wrong with her?', She asked.

Hopper sighed; 'Nothing!'

'But you think she's ugly?'

'No!'

'Too old?'

'No!'

'So you think she's beautiful?'

Hopper sighed in defeat, it had been a valiantly fought campaign but he'd been under siege for two weeks and he was exhausted.

'Yes', he said with a huff.

Eleven could smell victory; 'And kind?'

'Yes'

'And you want her to be happy?'

'Yes!'

'What if she started dating again? She would be happy then', Eleven mused, watching her father out the corner of her eye. She was satisfied to see his jaw clench.

'Would you be jealous, if she met someone else and got married?'

Hopper looked at her furiously. She had him now;

'So you would be jealous, that usually happens when someone has something that you want, like a nice car. Is that right?'

'Don't start playing dumb Kid, you've seen enough Dallas to give J.R. a run for his money.'

Looking up at him with her big brown eyes she said; 'Then you want Mrs Byers?'

'Well I'm not going to keep her in the garage', He said savagely.

'So you want her and she's beautiful and kind, and you don't want her to get married to someone else. So you love her.' She said with triumphant satisfaction.

Hopper didn't reply but stared out of the windscreen with forced application to the road.

'Well? You love her right?' Eleven prodded him in the arm repeatedly.

'YES! ALRIGHT! YES, I LOVE HER! Jesus Kid, you could teach things to infectious diseases!

Eleven pointed at him and shouted; 'AHA!'

'Where did you learn to do that?' He asked.

'From an interrogation book that Will got for me from the library.'

Hopper almost ran down old Gene McQuade crossing the road, given that all his attention was being used to stare at the girl next to him.

'Me and that boy are gonna have words.'

'So what are you going to do? Are you going to ask her on a date?'

'This is where the conversation ends Jane. You've already outmanoeuvred and humiliated a grown man. I am not discussing my love life with you, ok?'

'You mean lack of a love life.', She said.

'Jane!', He fired in warning.

The rest of the car journey was conducted in silence. The adult was sulking, and the young girl was planning out the rest of her cupid's scheme.

On the other side of town, Will was also keeping up his end of the bargain, he had casually sat himself at the kitchen table and taken up some drawing;

'Mom, Jonathan was talking about the old ways that photos were

made the other day. He said people used to stand still for ages while the picture formed on a glass plate. Do you have any old photo's I could look at?'

'William, I hope you're not trying to suggest that your mother is old enough to remember glass plate photographs and the Wild West!?'

Will grinned innocently; 'Of course not, it just got me thinking.'

Joyce smiled down at him; 'I have lots of photos of you and Jonathan when you were small?'

Wrinkling his face in disinclination, he said;

'I'd rather you see when you were our age.'

'Well ok, give me a minute,' Joyce bustled off and returned shortly with an old leather album, Will noticed that it was quite slim with aged photographs curled and bent at the edges.

Joyce sat next to him on the couch as Will turned the pages slowly, waiting for his mother to bring up the subject that he wanted to discuss. Will wasn't sure what a young Hopper looked like, but helpfully his mother pointed him out to Will not far into the album

'There's Hopper.' Joyce said smiling a little at the photograph. Will looked eagerly at the picture, his mother, looking young and fresh was situated between two men, both extremely tall. The man that Joyce had picked out was clean shaven and muscled, he was smiling down at Joyce as though he had forgotten the camera was there.

'Who's that?' Will said, pointing to the other male.

'Benny', said Joyce sadly. 'He died not long ago, I hadn't spoken to him for a while.'

Will looked up at his Mom, her eyes were glistening.

Joyce didn't mention that Benny had died after taking in Eleven, it was another example of how the laboratory had ruined the lives of Hawkins residents.

'What was Chief Hopper like in High School?' Will asked, wanting to spare his mother from upsetting thoughts.

'Well, he was like all boys that age, he didn't take anything seriously, he liked to party and chase the pretty girls, but he was way smarter than he let on and he was always there for me. I used to hang around with him and Benny all the time before I started dating your father.'

Will noticed the sad expression in his mother's eyes, so he slipped his arm round her waist, giving her a squeeze. Joyce smiled down at him and then turned back to the photo album.

'You know, me and Hopper even dated for a little in High School.'

Will's eyes grew wide; 'You didn't!'

Joyce laughed at the amazement on his face; 'Uh-huh, although I don't want you getting the wrong idea about your mother. There were only ever two men in my life.'

Her son was practically beaming at her; 'What?' She said.

'I'd never think you were a scarlet woman Mom, but why did you and Hopper never get back together?'

Will watched as his Mom slapped her thighs, declared that she had better get on with dinner and she scuttled from the room, her face aflame. He would definitely be telling Eleven all about this.

As Joyce prepared the dinner, she thought about her son's question. It wasn't a matter so much of why, their life had forked out onto separate paths. She didn't want to admit that a lot of that was to do with Lonnie. Her and Hopper had only been dating a couple of months when she switched her attentions to the school bad boy. At the time she had told Hopper that she wasn't ready to get serious, but it was the sheer seriousness of her feelings for him that had scared her off. She had good grades, and wanted to make something of herself, preferably getting out of Hawkins in the process.

If she had stayed with Jim Hopper she could easily see those plans melting away into another bored housewife. He took it well when she told him that it was over, he joked and teased her as usual but

something irrevocably shifted after that day. He got back with Chrissy, and they drifted apart.

So she went with Lonnie Byers, thinking that his bad boy persona would make him tire of her and she would be free of him in a couple of months after school ended. She was shocked to find herself married and pregnant with Jonathan before she realised what a terrible error she had made.

Hopper went out to Vietnam, she remembered crying when he left. There were stories about him about town, she heard about his promotion from his parents, there was even a medal for bravery. Her heart throbbed at every mention of his name, fearing the worst and then regretting her foolhardy mistake at undervaluing the man she had given up.

The rest she thought bitterly, was history. It was only the disappearance of Will that had bought them back together. They had seen each other frequently since Hopper returned from the city, but their conversations had been polite but distant. Neither had really known what to say, both were struck by the haunted and drawn expression in each of their faces.

The problem now was Bob. She missed him terribly and she felt extremely guilty for this unexpected, resurgent desire for the Chief of Police. She didn't know how long she would be expected to mourn her boyfriend, but it certainly didn't seem right to jump bones with a guy just because she wanted it so badly. Bob had been so good to her, supportive, caring and invested in the kids. She found it easy to love him, but *falling* in love with him had proven to be more difficult.

There was also the gnawing guilt that ate at her every time she thought about the looks Bob had given her and Hopper when they were together. It wasn't accusatory or angry, he observed their relationship with a passivity that spoke only of acceptance. Bob Newby knew he was second in command of Joyce Byer's heart when push came to shove. Joyce felt so angry at her betrayal of a man who had been so wonderful to her, that to seek a relationship with Hopper was an insult to his memory.

'Shit', she muttered, as she slammed the oven door closed. A



relationship? Is that seriously what she wanted with a man who had PTSD, anger management issues, and a notch on his bedpost for 60% of the women in Hawkins? It wasn't worth the risk to her heart, even if he did want her, she said to herself.

No, their relationship would go on as it had before. She needed to move on from the past, and that meant leaving those old relationships there. She slammed a cupboard door closed whilst her son looked on in alarm.

## 8. Chapter 8

Well that was a bit too heavy the end of the last chapter, let's have some light hearted jealousy shall we?

Chapter 8 – 'We're all mad here.'

Joyce decided that the best way to ignore her bodily desires was to do something extremely uncharacteristic. It involved Karen Wheeler and drinking, a lot. She couldn't remember the last time she had been on a night out, so it was always going to be messy.

Her plan took alarmingly little time to put into action. Karen had seemed scarcely less enthusiastic, shouting at Ted down the phone that he would be babysitting next Friday. Karen and Joyce hadn't exactly hung out in High school, they had moved in different social circles but they had always been friendly. The friendship between their children had actually solidified their own.

As soon as Joyce told the kids that she would be going on a night out, Will had passed the intelligence onto Eleven, who of course dangled this piece of information in front of Hopper like a carrot. They were sitting on the couch watching a movie when Eleven casually began;

'Are you working on Friday night Pop?'

'Uh-huh', he said as he flicked a chocolate wrapper towards a bowl onto the coffee table, which missed its target and fell onto the floor.

'Missed', Eleven said smugly as she tried to get her wrapper into the same bowl.

'Ok, I just wondered if you'd asked Mrs Byers on a date yet. Will said that she's going out on Friday.'

It had the desired effect, Hopper's wrapper flew up in the air and over his head; 'She's going out? Where?'

'Will didn't say, that's why I asked you.'

It was funny really, Eleven thought, it was so easy to get her Dad to

bite nowadays.

'Did Will say whether it was with a....man?', he asked as nonchalantly as possible.

'Hmmm, I can't remember.', Eleven said.

Hopper turned fully towards her now, putting his arm out to rest on the back of the couch.

'You know, so tell me.'

Eleven shrugged her shoulders and pretended to be invested in the movie, Hopper was physically squirming.

'I don't know what you thought would happen if you didn't ask her out', said Eleven sagely.

Hopper fell forward and face-planted a cushion. Eleven looked down at him grinning at the back of his head.

'Well, what did you think would happen?'

'Mfffffuerrr', said the cushion in distress.

'Uh huh, somebody else would ask her. You never know, this guy could be the *one*'

The cushion made a strangled noise, and then went silent. Eleven wondered if he had suffocated, so she decided to throw him a lifeline; 'Well it's lucky then that she's going out with Mrs Wheeler.'

Hopper sat bolt upright, his hair sticking up as though he had been electrocuted.

'Karen Wheeler?!'

'Uh huh.' Said Eleven, smiling impishly.

'You....', he accused

'You really ought to ask her out Pop', and as she said this she floated the wrapper in front of her face and then sent it soaring through the

air to land softly in the middle of the bowl.

'Show off.', he muttered.

Joyce was more worried about the idea of stepping off her porch in something other than brown slacks and her green store shirt. Joyce had let Karen do her make up, and after the third attempt of washing it off and starting again, they had settled on a layer of beautification that didn't make Joyce look like a hooker. Karen had originally wanted Joyce to wear a dress, but scoffing Joyce declared that she never wore dresses. She was more comfortable in her tight black jeans and her deep red asymmetrical top. As Joyce looked at herself in the mirror, she was surprised to see a woman who resembled the high school Joyce Hughes. Sure, she looked thin, but hell it brought out her cheekbones she thought. Fresh determination seeped into the lines of her face.

'I made it this far, I can survive anything. Joyce Byers, no more cowering.' She stood up straight, pushing her shoulders back and grabbed her bag off the wash stand.

'Hey Karen! I'm ready.'

Karen made a real show of fussing over Joyce as she came downstairs, she even hit Ted in the arm in an attempt to force a compliment from him. He acknowledged her beauty by popping his head round his magazine and raising his glass of whisky to her.

'Well that's real nice Ted' Karen whined; 'I guess we'll have to presume you're speechless'

'Uh-huh darlin', have a good time!'; and he disappeared back behind his magazine.

The ladies made their way to the local bar in Hawkins, with her new determination Joyce felt more uninhibited than she had for years, she needed to forget, and she needed to feel something other than the void in her.

They bought a round of drinks and crammed themselves into a booth, and within ten seconds Joyce was smoking and assessing the room.

Karen was in a dandy mood, a night out of the house away from Ted, to let her hair down and flirt a little. She was glad Joyce had agreed to this, she had become so downbeat since Lonnie. Karen always remembered Joyce with a tinge of jealousy at High School, whilst Karen was seen as the 'popular' girl, Joyce had a beauty that was unlike the other girls. She was tough, wild and opinionated. Karen knew that half the boys at school might not admit it but they all had a thing for Joyce Hughes. Over the years that wildness had disappeared incrementally, the slouch of her shoulders and the chain smoking had left her looking more like a wild bird caught in a cage.

'So how you doing sweetie?' Karen asked with real concern. They might have had their subtle rivalries but they were equals now.

Joyce surveyed her drink; 'Surviving, but I'll get there.'

Karen nodded as she took a sip of her drink; 'Bob was a good guy, a rare one. It will get easier after time, and you have the boys to keep you going.'

Joyce was swirling the straw around her drink absentmindedly.

'I know, I just don't want to feel like this for a second longer. I feel so responsible for what happened.'

'Hey' Karen said as she took Joyce's hand; 'None of this is your fault in any way, it was a freak accident. He would have done anything for you and the kids even if it meant taking risks. He was an adult Joyce, he made his decision to be with you. You're not responsible for this company taking him away from you.'

Tears had welled up in Joyce's eyes; 'He talked of us moving to Maine together you know' she said in reply.

'Oh hon, do you think you would have gone?'

'I don't know, maybe, I suppose it was a shock. At the time, I said I couldn't move the kids away from their friends but I don't know if there was something else as well.'

'We all would have missed you, you know. If you had moved to Maine.'

Joyce scoffed; 'Sure, people would miss gossiping about the Byers family, that's all.'

'No way, the people in this town have long given up talking about you in any negative way. The way you didn't give up on Will, your determination. People respect you, I think they always did you know.'

'Yeah well, their opinions don't mean shit to me, they didn't then and they don't now.'

'You know', Karen started; 'I always thought that after Will went missing you and the Chief would get back together. He was always at yours.'

Joyce went beet red as she answered; 'He's the Chief of Police, he had to be there Karen. Plus high school was a hundred years ago.'

Karen smiled wryly as she replied; 'A couple of months officially sure, but how long had you been friends before that, and if I was going to be really cruel I could factor in the small matter of him being in love with you since Kindergarten. So, you do the math.'

Downing her drink, Joyce smashed those pieces of information to the back of her mind. It wouldn't do to dwell on that thought whilst she was drunk and uninhibited. Instead she opted for a middle school response; 'EWWWWW, He does not!'

She then loudly called for another drink, which lead to Karen downing hers.

They were far down the road to inebriation and making a mess of themselves when Karen spotted Hopper sitting at the bar. Despite the bar being at the back of the building, away from the makeshift dancefloor, Hopper had orientated himself towards the dancing. In her drunken haze, Karen noticed that he seemed to be casting furtive glances in their direction. Karen decided on a little mischief, Joyce was far too engrossed in exorcising her demons through the medium of dance to notice Karen disappear off towards the bar.

Hop saw Karen approach but made a show of turning back to the bartender and asking for another beer.

'Hello Chief', Karen said in her most sultry voice.

Sighing at being caught out Hop turned back to her; 'Karen'

'What are you doing over here on your lonesome? Are you making a night of it?'

'Nope, just having a beer after work is all. Are you having a good time?'

Karen smiled alluringly and leant towards him; 'Mhmmm, I'm having a night off being a housewife to party.' Throwing the emphasis on the word 'party' like she had just seen a keg stand.

Leaning slightly away from the tipsy woman in front of him he said; 'That's swell, is Ted here?'

'No Sir! Just me and my girlfriend Joyce, painting the town red.'

She noticed Hopper's eyes flick towards Joyce who was waving her arms as if she was possessed. Despite this he couldn't help noticing the men that were starting to circle. Hopper noted in disgust that it looked like a cattle market with potential buyers bidding on the finest stock. He tried to ignore the twist in his gut at the thought.

Karen read him like a book, and went into full matchmaking mode; 'Why don't you stop looking so sad and come and have a dance with us?'

Hopper snorted and shook his head; 'I'm no dancer Karen, and I am no way drunk enough to even consider it. Sorry.'

Plastering a look of disappointment on her face she said; 'Too bad, I think we could do with a bit of a chaperone out there.' Karen looked back to the dance floor. One of the braver men had entered Joyce's fighting circle and was attempting to talk to her. Turning back to Hopper she smiled; 'I better go and keep an eye on Joyce, it looks like she's on a mission tonight!'

With that Karen Wheeler swayed off back to the dancing with two new drinks in her hand. She hadn't missed the look Hopper was giving Joyce, God knows she had seen it enough in High School.

Hopper followed her back with his eyes, the small twinge of discomfort had roared into a flame of jealousy as some young guy was attempting to draw Joyce away from the floor to one of the booths. He resisted the urge to walk up to that kid and slam his face through the wooden partition. Raking a hand through his hair he watched Joyce laugh at the boisterous behaviour of her admirer.

Hopper desperately wanted to talk to her, somehow force himself into their conversation without looking like some desperate old man. Luckily Karen, who had long lost interest in getting drunk was keeping an eye on the matter. Leaving Joyce to her friend for as long as she could, she made her way over to them;

'Joyce, I just saw Hop at the bar! Who knew he'd be here on a Friday night?'

It had the effect that she was hoping, Joyce immediately stopped paying attention to the guy in front of her and started scanning those at the bar; 'Huh, I forgot he comes here sometimes on a Friday.'

'Oh, are you in on the Chief's schedule, I didn't realise.'

Joyce didn't reply and the young man piped up; 'You talking about Chief Hopper? Man, that guy is something else. My friend Rudy says he's a real womaniser.'

Joyce snapped her head back towards where he was sitting, and fixed him with one of her stares; 'Well you tell Rudy he can keep his opinions to himself.' She then got up and made her way unsteadily to Hop at the bar. She wasn't going to have some boy pass judgement on Hopper, even if she had thought the same thing as a reason to not get involved.

Hopper had forced himself to look away rather than creep over Joyce's movements, but he jumped when he felt a small hand on her shoulder.

'Hey', He smiled brilliantly at her. The realisation that she looked even more beautiful than normal caught him off guard, especially as he could smell her perfume exuding from her skin. She was positively glowing from the alcohol and exercise.



'Hey Hopper! I didn't know you were here!' She was smiling at him and leaning over the bar with her arms crossed in front of her. Her head tilted to one side, she internally berated herself for flirty attitude but she couldn't help it. She wanted to attract him, she wanted to feel his hands on her, his mouth on her neck. 'Shit', she thought. As she was desperately trying to school her thoughts to something more chase, Hopper also seemed to be struggling for something to say. She used the time to order more drinks;

'Oh Hey, hey. Can I get two beers and two shots please?'

'So, are you having a good time?', he asked in a style that indicated he wished she would say no.

'Yeah, but I am far too drunk already.'

'Do you want me to take you home?' He said, a little too eagerly.

Joyce looked at him and cocked an eyebrow, her expression darkened at the possibility. She dragged her mind back to her pledge to move on and smiling widely said; 'No thanks, I'll catch a ride with Karen, I think Ted is coming to get us.'

Trying desperately to hide his disappointment Hop put his beer down and shrugged on his jacket; 'Ok, well you have a good time. I better get back to El.'

'Give her my love', Joyce said as she grasped his forearm. Before she could acknowledge the look in Hopper's eye she turned and walked away from him. Her gut was screaming at her to turn back round, quietly follow him out to the car park, climb in that truck of his and make him drive somewhere quiet.

It wouldn't do though, she needed healthy right now.

Hopper spent the drive back to the cabin gripping the wheel like it was the neck of some younger, more nubile male. The whites of his knuckles prominent against the brown leather.

Even while he had found it extremely annoying in High School, there was always a satisfaction in being the knight in shining armour to the drunk Joyce Hughes.

It was 3am when the phone started ringing. Hopper was awake, sitting up on his bed in the dark. He answered the phone after the first ring.

It was Karen; 'Chief, come and rescue Joyce. She wants to carry on partying with these dead beats. They want to take her to a bar out of town. They won't listen to me.'

Glenching his teeth, 'I'll be there in fifteen. Stall them' as he hung up the receiver.

Karen had failed to mention that Joyce had no intention of going with them, and was in the process of drunkenly refusing them. She had seen an opportunity that couldn't be missed, plus Ted had evidently fallen asleep and wasn't answering the phone.

Hopper had to hand it to Karen, she was extremely good at creating a drama. When he pulled into the parking lot of the bar, her crocodile tears immediately dried up. Leaving him to it, she silently went to sit in the cab of his pickup.

The insufferable kid from earlier was holding a laughing Joyce up against the passenger door of his car. As soon as he saw the hand on Joyce's hip he saw red. Joyce was clearly trying to push him away, he could hear her saying that she was getting a lift with her friend.

'Hey, French fry. Get your hands off that woman'.

The kid turned round and foolishly asked for credentials. Joyce waved drunkenly.

'The Chief of Police said so.'

'What do you care huh, go and find yourself another women. Hell, this whole town is full of ones you've already sampled.'

Hopper thought he might get his way after all and put him through something. In the meantime Joyce had scrunched up her face, pushed the guy roughly and said; 'I'm not your property mishter.'

'Well, I'm a caring guy. I care about my community and upholding the law. Now in this case, how about DUI for starters, and this

Gilbert', He said pointing to a guy in the group who looked no more than sixteen;

'With his acne, and the poor attempt at dressing him up to look older than the four fucking years old that he is? To me that looks like assisting a minor to drink to me.'

The guy shrugged his shoulders, Hopper strode over to him and shaking with anger, he said; 'I will crush your neck with my bare hands, stop taking advantage of an inebriated woman.'

Doesn't stop you though does it? I've seen you at this bar, doing exactly the same thing.' The guy said.

Joyce scoffed and with bitterness in her voice she said; 'He's got you there Hop.'

But before the sentence was out of her mouth, Hopper had planted his fist in the man's face. He was down on the gravel wailing, as Hopper scooped Joyce over his shoulder and stalked off towards his car. As he got in he shouted; 'I'll see you and Spotty tomorrow at my station!'

Karen was smiling serenely when the others joined her.

'Nice right hook Chief.'

'Well thank Karen', said Hopper flexing his hand.

Joyce had found the radio and was cranking up the music, both women started singing at the top of their lungs;

'In the midnight hour she cried, more, more, more, more!'

'OH BILLY!', Cried Joyce.

Karen starting laughing hysterically at Joyce's hand movements, initially designed to be sexy but now with added alcohol she looked like a mime artist looking for the light switch.

Hopper dropped off Karen first, mostly because her singing voice proved to be worst. The two women hugged, professing undying love

to each other until Karen fell out of the cab.

The rest of the journey was much quieter, Joyce was sitting on her hands and looking out the window. She didn't trust herself, given her earlier fantasy.

'Why am I always rescuing you when you're drunk Hughes?', he asked finally.

'Because that is your job.' She hiccupped; 'To serve and protect.' She leant toward him and placed an unsteady finger on her chest 'me'

He looked at her seriously. 'Is that all?'

She looked at him in confusion for a moment and offered; 'To come to Will's doctor's appointments?'

Joyce suddenly laughed and said; 'Pops', don't you think that's weird? Doctor Owens called you Pops.'

She continued chuckling to herself until Hopper's hurt voice broke through;

'Sometimes Joyce I don't think you take me seriously.'

'How can I', she said matter of factly; 'You haven't taken yourself seriously for a long time.' Joyce settled herself against the seat and closed her eyes.

Visibly ruffled he replied; 'You know I take plenty seriously, I take you seriously.'

'I know you do, and Will and Jonathan and El.' She said with a sigh.

'But that ain't enough is it?' He said to the silent cab.

Hopper drove the rest of the way in silence.

## 9. Chapter 9

Chapter 9 – 'Everything's got a moral if only you can find it.'

They hadn't spoken for two weeks and Hopper was suffering. He conveniently forgot that it was his own, self-imposed radio silence that had led him to his current sorry state.

Joyce had left numerous messages on his answer machine and was now resorting to asking Eleven to relay her concerns.

Eleven had resorted to standing over his bed every morning, hands on hips with a look of disgust in her eyes at her bearded, blurry eyed father. 'Pops, you smell bad. Ring Mrs Byers please'

Hopper replied; 'Don't wanna', into his pillow. He hadn't been sleeping well, his dreams were full of Joyce surrounded by admirers whilst she laughed at him. He felt it was much easier to stay in bed if he was going to be laughed at when he was awake as well. Their last conversation had proven a torment to him, how could he show her that he took things seriously, that he wasn't a joke? That his days of sleeping around were long gone?

Eleven had been regularly speaking to Will on the phone. Will reported that Mrs Byers seemed really miserable, but wouldn't tell her boys what was wrong. It made the young girl angry and frustrated that Mrs Byers was unhappy, and that her father was the cause. She found it incomprehensible that someone so responsible as Hopper could be so childish. Eleven had however, cunningly left her jacket behind when she was last at Will's, and she'd been working on Hopper to go and pick it up for her for the last few weeks.

'Pops please get my jacket, it's been there weeks and the weather will be getting colder soon.'

Hopper grunted into the pillow again.

Eleven raised herself to her full height and said in a voice of such authority; 'Chief Hopper' that he turned to squint at her.

'If you don't go and get my jacket, I will have to use the mail order catalogue again.'

Hopper sat bolt upright and in a voice of panic said; 'Not mail order again!'

'Yes', she said as though someone had died; 'The mail order catalogue'.

Hopper thought back to his daughter's first experience with mail order, and the shock to his system and wallet when he had come home to stacks of packages. He had been almost frightened of his daughter when he had told her that he couldn't afford it, and most of it had to be sent back. Her mood has caused the power to go out almost constantly for a week afterwards.

'Ok, I'll go'. He said; 'Just stay away from the catalogue. Please?'

'OK', Eleven smirked as she skipped out of the room.

Joyce was on the phone when he knocked, he heard her shout; 'Come in' but he deliberated awkwardly on the porch as he warred between wanting to see her and running away.

Joyce started and gave an uncomfortable little wave as she turned to look when Hopper stomped into the living room. Mouthing to him to sit down, she turned back into the kitchen. Hopper fell onto the sofa, his hands placed deliberately on his thighs, like a kid waiting outside the principal's office. He heard her laugh, it was self-conscious and throaty. The noise made the jealous beast in him rise again, he felt like he was constantly on the edge of anger lately.

By the time that Joyce walked into the living room, Hopper had worked himself up into a fit of sulking resentment.

'So... met any more teenage boys lately?'

He knew that it was a disastrous mistake as soon as the words had come tumbling out of his mouth. Joyce appeared to double in size like a bristling cat. Even whilst he sat there in his savage mood, he noticed that she looked even prettier than normal, she had done something with her hair, and he thought he could even see a bit of

make-up. Whilst the visage caused him pleasure, the realisation of a blooming Joyce only added to his conviction that she was on the lookout for a man. He suddenly lost any semblance of rationality that he had been holding on to.

'Well it's nice to see you too Hop, thanks for returning my calls by the way.'

'Sorry, I've been busy processing horny 15 year olds.'

'Well that must have been rewarding, did you need something?' Hopper could see that she was almost crackling with anger now. It only spurred him on.

'Eleven left her jacket here.'

Joyce disappeared and returned with the girl's denim coat, throwing it at the smirking man in front of her.

'Thanks, so was that your boyfriend on the phone? It's sweet that he calls you during recess.'

Joyce had dealt with an irrational Hop many times before, but for some reason, his smug expression was just too much for her to bear. Maybe it was the fact that she had last seen him in chivalry mode, driving her home like the old days. Then she hadn't seen or heard from him for weeks. She had already been flustered when Hopper came through the door, she'd been speaking to Karen who was relieving their night out with painful detail. Joyce's memory of their night out was sketchy at best, and to hear about the drunken dancing, flirting with young men and being put over Hopper's shoulder had left her burning with shame. Karen had just started talking about Hopper's obvious jealousy when Hopper walked in.

Karen was giving a blow by blow account of all the desperate looks of desire that Hopper had been throwing her before she realised Joyce had gone silent.

'You still there?'

'Yep' Joyce said quietly.

'Hang on, is Hopper there? Right now?'

'Err, yes', Joyce said with a throaty laugh.

Karen squealed and made Joyce promise to call her back later.

'This is better than those trashy romance novels!' Joyce heard her say before she hung up.

The conversation had left Joyce in increasing frustration, to hear of his potential jealousy had caused a rush of desire to form like a knot in her lower stomach. His arrival seemed like an exhilarating prompt of fate. That was until Hopper had opened his mouth.

'Let's cut the shit jokes Hop, c'mon get it all off your chest. You've obviously got something to say.'

Joyce folded her arms in an effort to control herself, he rose and approached her, his eyes flashing dangerously.

'What do you think you were doing?! Do you have any idea how desperate you looked?'

'He was barely an adult!'

Joyce screamed at the top of her lungs; 'SO WHAT?!'

'I had no intention of sleeping with him! And even if I did, I wouldn't be doing anything worse than you men who go out and look for some young impressionable woman to fuck!'

Hopper stuttered; 'That's different!' as he caught the accusation in Joyce's eyes.

'Yeah for men it's acceptable. A woman even considers it and she's a whore. I can do what I like, and that includes sleeping with whoever I like. So, what was your excuse for being desperate!?''

He mouthed silently for a few moments; 'You know I was going through some stuff.'

'Haven't we all been through some *'stuff'*?! I lost my boyfriend Hop, he



died right in front of my eyes. I needed a night off to try and forget this gnawing guilt, and you have the audacity to come into my home and tell me how to behave?!

Suddenly feeling the weight of his conscience, Hopper reached out to her, but she pushed him forcibly away; 'Don't touch me.'

There was silence for several minutes, which were torture to Hopper's feelings. He tried to say something only to hear Joyce's hurt voice say;

'I honestly thought you'd be the last one to judge me.'

'I..'

Joyce stared him down, her eyes illuminated by unshed tears. He desperately wanted to tell her that it was all jealousy. That he couldn't bear the idea of another man succeeding where he couldn't even endeavour.

'You what, Hopper? What's all this about? I wasn't doing anything illegal, I was safe. I just wanted to feel good for a while.'

'Joyce, I'm sorry. I just wanted to protect you.'

'I didn't call you, Karen did. If you were that worried about me, maybe you should have stuck around at the bar because right now I don't need a protector. I need a friend.'

Hopper stood uselessly by the sofa, his arms hanging comically beside him.

'You're right, I'm so sorry Joyce, I am your friend and I'll always be here for you.'

Joyce scoffed before saying; 'I think you've proven what sort of friend you are. You better go.'

She almost couldn't bear the hurt look in his eyes when he turned to leave, but she was absolutely exhausted by his judgement and the never-ending emotional whiplash.

The house felt unbearably silent after the door shut behind him. She sat on the floor of the kitchen, crying tears of betrayal and frustrated hopes until Will got home from school.

Hopper drove like a man possessed on the way back to the station. He barely looked at the road in front of him, and instead spent his time in an angry internal monologue about what a complete fool he was.

Turning on the radio in an effort to distract himself, the opening bars of 'Every breath you take' reverberated around the cab.

Hopper groaned at the universe working against him, as it simultaneously started to rain. He stared furiously out the windshield at the road in front of him, but unbidden tears started to form despite his best efforts.

'Dammit' He said as he started to slap himself in the face.

'Pull yourself together Man!'

'Mom, why is the Chief hitting himself in the face?' Said a young boy waiting at the intersection, hypnotised by the image of Hopper shouting and slapping himself.

The mother tried to place her hands over her child's eyes saying; 'Don't look Tommy, he's obviously having some kind of episode.'

Hopper saw the horrified look on the woman's face as her child pointed at him, but for the moment he really didn't care.

*'I feel so cold and I long for your embrace  
I keep crying baby, baby, please'*

## 10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10 – Go to sleep, darlings, until the summer comes again.

There were times that the staff of the Hawkins Police Station knew that noise was to be kept to a minimum. It was understood that their Chief of Police was mercurial and prone to fits of rage, and once he was in that funk, they knew to keep the hell out of dodge.

These bursts of unbridled irrational anger never used to last long, the previous record belonged to Powell when he had lost a prisoner because he'd been flirting with a gas station attendant.

This however, was not a record, but a Tsunami of Hopper anger. There was even a secret placard going around that proudly counted the length of their boss's mood.

'Minus fifteen days since Chief Hopper's voice fell below 30,000 decibels'

Powell was even conducting mock weather reports to whoever would listen.

'On the Western seaboard we have warm fronts moving in from the ocean. As they travel across the landmass however they're going to encounter a cold front. It's frosty ladies and gents, and the epicentre of these freezing temperatures appears to be coming from a small town in Indiana.'

He would then do an impersonation of 'Hurricane Hopper', as he whirled around the station screaming in rage. Strangely Powell's impersonation always seemed to sound like the Wicked Witch of the East.

Hopper walked into the main office after letting the front door bang loudly behind him. Florence silently passed him a cup of coffee as he stalked past, the only indication of his thanks being a muffled grunt. Powell who wasn't expecting the Chief back so soon was halfway through his; 'Auntie Em, Auntie Em it's a twister, it's a twister!' when Hopper walked in. In an effort to stop himself, he collided with a

desk and fell over it head first.

Hopper's eyebrows which seemed at the moment to be permanently knitted together, and were struggling to keep up with the strain, had a brief, unexpected reprieve when he rolled his eyes at his officer currently laying in a pile on the floor.

'Powell, how often were dropped on your head as a baby?'

He didn't give his colleague a chance to answer as he shut himself in his office. Florence gave it a full hour before she knocked on his door.

'Something wrong Chief Hopper?'

Hopper was laying on the floor of his office with the telephone by his side.

'That obvious huh?'

'Well dear, you do have a face on you that would make Arnold Schwarzenegger shiver.' Florence said as she edged into the room.

It took a while for Hopper to answer, and as he did it sounded as though it was taking a great effort to keep his voice under control.

'I messed up Flo.'

She sat on a chair beside him and as she arranged her skirt into order said; 'You're going to have to be more specific than that Chief.'

'Me and Joyce had an argument, she said she doesn't want to speak to me.' Florence watched in fascination as the Chief of Police's Adams apple bobbed dangerously in his throat.

'I see.' She said cryptically.

'I said some horrible things.'

'We all say things we regret to the people we care about from time to time dear. I'm sure it's only temporary.'

'You don't understand', he said; 'I was so out of line. I've tried calling

her fourteen times since I got back and she's either swearing at me or refusing to answer.'

Florence said something that sounded suspiciously like; 'Children' before sighing.

'Did you apologise?'

Hopper laid there thinking for several moments before saying; 'I think so.'

Florence now muttered something that sounded a lot like; 'Men' in an exasperated voice.

'Give her some space to calm down, calling her like a lovesick teenager won't do. It didn't work in high school and it won't work now.'

Hopper opened his mouth to protest but Florence held up her wise old hand to silence him. She was tired with his charade and decided that brutal honesty was the best policy.

'Now dear, let's not beat around the bush. Everyone in this town knows that you're bursting at the fingertips in love with Joyce Byers. Even Roger Wyatt knows it, and he barks at sheep. Now, you have to decide whether to try and make a go of it or not; because neither you, Joyce, Powell or the rest of the residents of Hawkins deserve this type of police chief. I know you love her my dear but you have to question why something hasn't happened yet, and that maybe all these fights are just a sign that you aren't right for each other. You've spent so much time together lately that maybe you need to get some space.'

She watched him patiently as Hopper's chest rose and fell at a jagged pace.

'You need to get yourself up, dust yourself off and start smiling a bit more. You have that delightful little girl waiting for you at home. Make the most of the second chances you have.'

Hopper rubbed his face with his hands and sat up, 'You're right, I'm sorry.'

Florence reached out and stroked Hopper's cheek, 'Of course I am my sweet boy. Now get out there and check on Powell. I think he's given himself concussion.'

That night when Hopper returned home, exhausted and heart sore he told El that he wouldn't be seeing Joyce for a little while.

Eleven predictably stormed away from the dinner table, leaving him to eat his dinner in solitude. He knew that she would be upset by his decision, and he had toyed with the idea of not telling her what had happened between them. However, Flo's comments earlier that day had brought him back to his senses. He ought to be making the most of his chance to be a father again, and Eleven had shown herself to be more emotionally capable than he was.

After heating up her dinner, Hopper took it into his daughter who was glaring at him from under her blanket. Setting the plate on the side, he sat down on the bed and put his arm around the little bundle of anger.

'I want you to know that even though I'm giving Joyce some space, you can still go over there, and Will and everyone can still come here.'

He was met with resentful silence, and he sighed.

'I said some horrible things to Joyce today, and she is real angry at me, like, pissed-off Bobcat angry.'

The blankets didn't reply other than; 'Language.'

Chuckling softly he carried on; 'I said horrible things because I was jealous, and I wanted to hurt her back. That's not an acceptable thing to do to someone you... love.'

Eleven's head popped up above the blanket in triumph; 'At least you can say it now'

'You called it Kiddo, but I still hurt her and I said things that were unfair and judgemental. I need to learn to keep my temper and not take it out on people.'

'You're not very good at communicating', Eleven said sagely.

'No, I guess not, and it goes for you too. I'm sorry if I've been sour with you. I don't mean too, I guess I'm just hard on the people I love.' Hopper ran a hand through his hair.

'You push people because you want to make sure they'll put up with you, and won't leave.' Eleven said looking at him sadly.

Hopper stared at his daughter in amazement.

'I'm afraid of losing people too.' She said quietly.

Hopper grabbed her and pulled her into a bear hug; 'You ain't losing anyone again kiddo, you hear me?'

Eleven nodded into his chest as she plucked the blue hair band round her wrist. Hopper kissed the top of her head and said; 'Do you understand why Joyce needs some space?'

'I think so'

'I'll still be dropping you off and picking you up, I just won't be going in or having dinner.'

'Ok', she said, adding; 'I liked it when we all had dinner.'

Hopper had a lump in his throat as he said; 'Me too.'

The next time Eleven went to the Byers, he dropped her off in sight of the house and kept an eye on her as she walked to the house. He watched from his rear-view mirror as Joyce stared at his cruiser, before she went inside and shut the door.

## 11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11 – "It is better to be feared than loved."

It was 4 am, and Hopper was sat on the porch of the cabin, the only light was a soft yellow shade from the curtains of Eleven's bedroom, and the glowing red ember of his cigarette.

He'd worked overtime, and, after crawling into bed, once again found that he couldn't sleep. He liked sitting on the porch at night, where there was nothing but the sound of the wind pushing through the leaves and branches. He enjoyed these times when he was just a passive observer, where he had no responsibility for the things that went on around him.

He would often sit there and anticipate a storm rolling in, just by a change in the wind.

He would give all this wholesome meditation shit up for a good night's sleep though. If it wasn't for the nightmares, it was the gnawing recollection of the shameful things his mouth often said without his brain's say-so. He would lay there, becoming more and more frustrated with the dark and himself, and sleep would slide a little bit further away.

Christ, he needed to move on from this, this twisting anguish and indecision. Flo's words the other day had dug into his flesh, Joyce had picked Bob because he was nice and dependable and all sorts of other stupid words ending in able. Whereas Jim Hopper was a mess, a guy who would rather have an argument than say what he actually felt. No wonder she dated Bob Newby, he was easy to be around. Whereas he was stuck in his ways, even his happiness at finding Eleven hadn't changed him in essentials. He was a mercurial, hot-tempered, jealous, overweight son of a bitch. Then why did he still cling onto this foolish hope of a fairy tale ending, if he was miserable by nature? Why did he always try to find some way to reach out and touch her, or catch himself staring at her with an expression that would, in all other circumstances make him retch with derision?

Was he obsessed? Did he have some kind of complex, that had gone undiagnosed?



Hopper pushed the tips of his fingers into the sockets of his eyes, trying to massage away the tension headache he seemed to suffer from regularly nowadays.

Perhaps if things had been different when they were in high school, if she hadn't dumped him unceremoniously for Lonnie Byers, maybe he would feel like their relationship was finished business and he could move on with his life.

"Where's Chrissy tonight?", Benny asked as he reclined on the hood of his truck.

"Grounded. Her mom found smokes in her bag."

Benny raised himself up onto his elbows; "Chrissy doesn't smoke?"

"Nope.", Hopper grinned mischievously, as the smoke billowed from his nose and mouth.

Benny looked at his friend and started laughing; "Getting bored of her already huh?".

Hopper scratched his neck absently; "Well she's isn't well known for her sparkling conversation."

Benny smiled and shook his head; "I'm not complaining. She's far too physical, could hardly get a sentence out of either of you."

"Yeah, Joyce called her a leech", Hopper said grinning.

"Talking of Hughes, where is she?"

"Refused to hang out.", Hopper said as he shrugged his shoulders.

"On account of the leech?"

"Uhuh.", Hopper sounded nonchalant, but Benny thought he looked annoyed, his eyebrows had knotted together, and that was the tell-tale sign.

"Why don't we swing by hers and pick her up? It's still early?"

Hopper shrugged but Benny was already making his way to the front of his truck. Hopper slung himself into the cab and chain-smoked the entire drive to Joyce's. As they pulled up on her driveway, Hopper leaned over and pressed the horn.

The diminutive figure of Joyce appeared at the window after a frustratingly long pause.

"And what can I do for you boys?", She drawled as she leaned out the window.

"Coming out Hughes?", Benny shouted.

"Depends, where's Chrissy?"

"At home, grounded," Hopper replied, smirking.

This was apparently the right answer, she nodded and shut the window. Within a couple of minutes, she was sandwiched between Benny and Hopper as they drove through the town. Hopper watched her intently as she smoked and laughed with Benny. Joyce meanwhile was trying to ignore the feel of Hopper's leg pressed against hers.

She wished he wasn't so damn tall, it was claustrophobic in this weather with him looming and pushed up against her.

"Hop, can you not move over? I'm suffocating between you two.", She said, pushing back against him.

"I was here first, you could always get in the bed if you like, might sort out that hair of yours", Hopper reached out a hand to muss up Joyce's hair, but she slapped it away.

"It looks like birds have been nesting in it", he said, squinting at her hair, as though it was a wildlife documentary.

"Just because I don't spend four hours on my hair in the morning like your girlfriend,"

Hopper smiled in triumph; "Sounds like someone's jealous Benny."

"I am not!"

"Uh-huh, just because you haven't been on a date with a guy, like, ever."

"I am not jealous of Chrissy, I'd be exhausted if I'd been through half the guys she has."

Hopper whistled; "Low blow Hughes!"

"Well, she's dated five guys this year alone, Hopper. Not including you."

"We can't all be Miss Perfect like Joyce Hughes. Life would be real dull."

"Food anyone?", Benny asked in a bored voice, almost to himself. Joyce crossed her arms and seethed, staring out the windshield.

"I could eat", Hopper patted his stomach.

Joyce scoffed; "Of course you could, you eat non-stop. You're starting to get as wide as you are tall"

"I am not!", he said outraged.

"You look like the Pilsbury Doughboy", Joyce said poking him in the stomach.

"HEY! I DO NOT LOOK LIKE THE DOUGHBOY"

She poked him again, "Hmm you're not as good-humored as him."

"Lay off Hughes", he said pointing a warning finger.

"Or what? You'll threaten me with baked goods?!"

Benny drove to the closest diner if only to get them to stop bickering. He was out of luck though, they only paused to draw breath and order some food. Normally their arguing was good-natured, but tonight there was a sharper edge to their snarking.

Joyce left the table, ostensibly to go to the toilet but stated that it was to get away from Hopper's face.

Benny asked a smiling Hopper; "What's up with you two, you're at each other's throats tonight?"

"No more than usual, Ben."

"Way more than usual, normally you cut her some slack but tonight you're relentless."

"Benny, when did you become such a square? Joyce loves it when we fight, it gives her an outlet for that boring, picture-perfect life she has at home"

Benny leaned back and crossed his arms with an entirely skeptical look on his face, "Has something gone on between the two of you? That I don't know about?"

"What d'you mean?"

A long huff escaped from Benny's mouth; "Something's different, I feel like I'm watching a really aggressive, long-ass mating ritual."

Hopper looked at him flabbergasted, but his eyes were hungry.

"I'm seeing Chrissy.", He said, finally.

"Yeah, and I think this is what started it all off."

"Dating Joyce Hughes would be like putting my hand in a fire and expecting it not to burn," Hopper said, almost wistfully.

"Don't get me wrong, I think she's just as much to blame as you for this, but it's getting old man. She seems to spend all her time either looking at you or trying not to look at you lately. I think she might be jealous of Chrissy. She won't hang around if you're with her, and she looks furious whenever you two get interrupted by her. I love you both, but I want my friends back."

The expression on Hopper's face changed incrementally during Benny's scientific report, he was hanging on Benny's every word like a lightbulb had gone off in his head.

"I'm going to the little boy's room." Hopper got out and stalked off

towards the toilets.

Joyce clutched the sides of the sink as she looked at herself in the mirror.

"Ok, you listen to me, Joyce Hughes. Whatever you think is going on here, it needs to stop. You've clearly lost your mind, he is your friend, and he is seeing someone else." Not that that has anything to do with it." She added hastily.

She ran her damp hands through her hair at the temples and round her neck, sighing at the feeling of cold water against her skin. It must be some kind of temporary insanity caused by the heat, there was no other explanation. She was still trying to school her thoughts towards platonic friendship as she left the toilets when she heard Hoppers rumbling voice ask;

"So why don't you like Chrissy?", Joyce jumped. He was stood in front of her, taking up far too much room in the small corridor. Immediately she felt the prickling heat return to her skin and settle in her stomach. The phrase 'platonic friendship', suddenly disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Not this crap again.", she said in faked calmness.

"You're jealous", the smile on his face bordered on malevolence as he edged towards her.

Joyce pushed him in the chest; "Shut up Hop, you're delusional."

"Nope. Entirely sane. I think you are jealous, and you're jealous of Chrissy. You want what she's got." Hopper puffed out his chest like a peacock and grinned down at her. Joyce scoffed dramatically.

Hopper sucked in his bottom lip and nodded as he closed down the distance between their two bodies. "Ok, maybe I was wrong, but I have a theory I want to test out. I wonder if I did this, would you like it?"

He leaned forward, placing one hand on the wall behind her. She looked straight at him with those determined eyes of hers. He knew she wouldn't back down, and suddenly it became imperative to him

that she wouldn't.

'You look like you're about to take a leak against the wall.' She sneered at him, but her lips were parted and Hopper could feel her short breaths against his face.

"Ok, what about if I ran my hand like this...", Hopper ran his fingers gently across the nape of her neck and towards her cheek. To his surprise she gasped and her eyes widened.

Emboldened from such an immediate success, he smirked and said; "Or how about this?"

Hopper shifted closer and trailed his mouth from her ear, down her neck, leaving the mark of his lips against her skin, without the satisfaction of a kiss. Joyce trembled against him, her head tilted traitorously, imperceptibly upwards to allow him further access to her skin.

Pleased with himself he stood back and grinned at her, enjoying the blush on her cheeks and the dishevelment of her hair.

"How was that Hughes?", he said seriously.

That was the first and only time he rendered her speechless.

"So, you are jealous." He said, all trace of lightheartedness done away with. She shoved him away and turned back towards the restaurant when she saw Chrissy standing in the doorway.

"Oh Jeez", Hopper said as he followed Joyce's gaze.

Chrissy marched towards them both and slapped Hopper across the face with a crack that made Joyce wince. Rooted to the spot, Joyce looked on awkwardly at the drama unfolding. Chrissy was flinging her arms around, as the mascara made track marks down her face. When she turned to Joyce and her demeanor threatened to open up a deluge of abuse, Joyce turned and fled through the restaurant, dragging Benny from his chair out into the parking lot.

"Joyce, what's the matter?" Benny said, catching the horrified expression on her face.

"Hopper cornered me outside the toilets, he came on to me. But Chrissy was there, she saw."

Benny's worried expression became a grimace; "Ok, get in the truck and keep your head down. I'll get Hopper."

Joyce wrung her hands as she waited for Benny to come back, she couldn't see Hopper anywhere, neither he nor Chrissy emerged.

Wordlessly Benny got back into the cab, holding two paper bags and a shake. He handed them to Joyce and the truck roared into life. He was halfway down the road when Joyce asked; "What about Hop?"

"He's got a couple of things to sort out.", Benny's jaw was clenched until he pulled up outside Joyce's house. They ate in silence, although Joyce didn't feel very hungry anymore and she would have preferred to go indoors and think without interruption about what had happened.

Benny turned to her, his voice suddenly soft but his eyes continued to be angry.

"What happened back there?"

"I told you, Chrissy saw Hopper come onto me."

"Did Hopper... do anything he shouldn't have done?" Benny's knuckles turned white on the steering wheel.

"What d'you mean?", She asked, confused.

"Did he...force himself on you?", Benny looked out the window, clearly uncomfortable with the implication.

"What, no! He was totally out of line, but that's Hop in general. He didn't... do anything I didn't want him to do." She said in a rush, her cheeks reddening.

"Thank God," Benny dropped his head, and let out a sigh of relief.

"How could you think that?", she said accusingly.

"You looked so frightened when you came over, I've never seen you like that. I'd just been telling him that I thought you were jealous of Chrissy. I wanted to make sure he hadn't hurt you."

She put her hand on his arm; "Hopper is a real jerk sometimes, but he would never hurt me, Benny. "

"Intentionally no, but he has a habit of hurting people without meaning too.", he said sadly.

They sat there in silence for a while, both thinking very different things. The mark of Hopper's lips had left a searing trail on Joyce's neck, but all she could think of was Chrissy's distraught face.

"As long as you're ok," Benny said finally, pulling Joyce out of her reverie.

"Thank you for looking out for me Benny." She kissed him on the cheek and got out of the truck. "See you tomorrow."

"Night Hughes."

Hopper was sat in his car touching the throbbing pain in his cheek. It had got dark and he couldn't be bothered to drive home from school. He had just been slapped for the second time in two days, and he concluded that he much preferred a tackle on the football field compared to a slap. Whilst he felt bad about Chrissy, and he did feel bad, Hopper was far too distracted by the memory of Joyce reacting to him the way she did. He could hardly believe his luck at the time, but now, with his swollen cheek, and the fact that Joyce had been avoiding him all day, he was feeling pretty deflated.

Being dumped in front of a hallway of teenagers wasn't ideal, but there was no way he was going to agree to Chrissy's demands that he stop being friends with Joyce. Not if there was one iota of a chance that Joyce would date him. But, that seemed unlikely now. He sighed and wondered what Benny was up too that night, when the driver's door was yanked open and a blur of black wavy hair threw itself into the driver's seat.

He had only a second to register that Joyce Hughes was straddling



his lap before she took his face in both hands and kissed him. He was too shocked to react to the pressure of her lips on his, and when she pulled away he could only stare at her.

"You deserved all those slaps, you know." She said almost aggressively.

"Yeah well", he said somewhat stupidly as he realized that Joyce's blouse was undone enough for him to see her chest.

"You were right. I was jealous." She said fiercely.

"Oh", was all he could say before she was kissing him again, and eventually Hopper caught up with current events. The movement of his lips against hers, made Joyce sit back and look at him;

"What, do you prefer your guys to be unresponsive?"

"What about Chrissy?", she demanded.

Hopper looked around as if expecting her to be sat on the back seat of his car.

"What about her?"

"Is it definitely over?", Joyce asked in a way that suggested she was extremely vulnerable.

"Are you kidding? She told me I couldn't hang around with you anymore. I wouldn't have given you up, even if you had told me to get lost last night."

Joyce smiled shyly, and he raised his mouth to hers, hungry for more of her. Her arms slid around his neck, and the feel of his hands sliding up her thighs slowly, tentatively, brought a keening sigh to the back of her throat. Hopper kissed her back with everything he could muster, his hands roving her neck, back, and legs. She moaned as he bit her lower lip softly, and as she opened his mouth to him, Hopper moaned as Joyce ground against him, searching instinctively for the release she needed. His hands slid up and under her blouse until he reached the base of her bra, his rough skin tickling her unbearably. She gasped for breath as she tore her mouth away from

him, and his stubble ran the length of her neck.

"Oh god, Hop", she murmured as he found a spot behind her ear that she evidently liked. Her voice, begging him for more, drove any semblance of propriety out the window.

'Get in the back of the car' he ordered breathlessly.

"Not here", she said. "Take me to the lake"

Hopper practically threw her in the passenger seat as the engine roared to life.

The drive was silent, the tension unbearably thick. Joyce wordlessly passed him a cigarette and chain-smoked the rest of the packet before he skidded to a stop in a secluded section of the woods abutting the lake.

He turned to her and she looked almost frightened. He felt apprehensive himself, "Hughes will you get in the back of the car now please?" He choked out, almost begging.

She nodded once, fiercely, and got out of the car and onto the back seat.

Hopper got out and stood for a few seconds by the door. "Don't fuck this up Hop for Christ sake."

When he climbed into the back seat, Joyce was looking at him in amusement.

"What?", he said self-consciously.

"There's even less room for you in here than our desk in science, you look so ridiculous.", They both started laughing, giddy in the ether of suddenly discovered hormones, before hours of kissing made their lips red and swollen. It was early morning before Hopper dropped Joyce off home, both of them smiling inanely at their parents until they discovered they were grounded.

The next three weeks were a blur for Joyce Hughes and Jim Hopper, they spent every spare second together. They learned as much about each other's bodies as they could without going the whole way.

Hopper was strangely chivalrous about sex, insisting that their first time should be special, and not in the back seat of a car. Joyce hadn't been happy, she told him that she was ready, and it was torture for Hopper, feeling her insistence at closing the distance, to not just give in to her.

It sounded like a cliché, but he had actually been planning a grand gesture for those three weeks. It was such a stereotype, but he'd ordered the corsage for prom, booked a room at the nicest motel he could afford and desperately tried not to let the word love come out of his mouth before then. He thought it was all going to plan until Lonnie Byers arrived and fucked everything up.

He still believed that Joyce had started seeing Lonnie because she was bored of him when actually, it was the terrifying looks that Hopper gave her, looks that made her feel anchored and safe. Looks where, instead of desire, she would find a soft gaze that left his heart on display. Part of her knew, that if she gave in to those looks, and spoke what she felt they would end up in that perfect, nuclear family that Hopper said he hated so much. Joyce wanted to see the world and do something more than just settle. He cried when she broke it off, and the image of him sat outside her house stayed with her for years, until it took on an even more poignant perspective, when she realized what she had given up.

Hopper swore in frustration, stubbed out his cigarette and went back inside to more sleepless hours.

## 12. Chapter 12

Chapter 12 – "Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Hawkins was a lot like other towns in America, hell it was a lot like towns all over the world. Everyone knows everyone, and therefore everyone knows your business, and the one person you don't want to see tends to be on every street corner. Hawkins only seemed to be special in its multitude of supernatural horrors.

Jim Hopper was doing his utter best to avoid Joyce Byers, not only for her benefit but for his own self-preservation. He drove his car around the block rather than go past the glass-fronted display of Melvald's, all the calls he took were handpicked to avoid the slightest chance of bumping into her. As a consequence, he was spending most of his time on the outskirts of Hawkins, dealing with the somewhat ostracized hermits, kooks and creeps.

One afternoon, however, he found himself writing up a report as he leaned against the door of his cruiser in the main square of the town. Trying to make the most of the weak winter sunlight, he'd thrown his hat into the truck to soak up as much of the precious Vitamin D that was available.

"Hey Chief", said a mild voice, somewhere in front of his clipboard.

Hopper looked up to see Steve Harrington stood in front of him, hands in his pockets and bouncing on the balls of his feet. Hopper grunted a reply.

"How's El?" Steve whispered, although his voice was slightly too loud to be considered conspiratorial.

"She's good, although she's spending too much time with Wheeler lately."

Hopper's eyebrows knotted together. It was one thing to be unlucky in love, but totally another to have to watch your teenage daughter dating. It just seemed excruciatingly unfair.

Steve nodded; "There's just something about those Wheelers huh?" He ran a hand through his hair, and he looked sad even though he had spoken jovially enough.

Hopper looked the kid over, he was obviously having a shitty time with his love life too. He grasped Steve's shoulder and gave it a squeeze, the best action of quiet sympathy he could muster; "You'll get over it in time, kid."

Steve shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot; "Oh yeah, absolutely."

"What about you, a special lady in your life?" Steve said, in an effort to lighten the mood.

Hopper grabbed his hat out of the truck and slammed the door, a little too forcefully. He knew he shouldn't have said anything, now he was getting the third degree.

"Hah, I've got women lining up around the block", He said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Steve stared at him, and then said; "That bad?"

"That bad, kid." Hopper started to cross the road and to his annoyance, noticed that Steve was following him.

"Well Valentines is coming up, you might have a secret admirer." Steve offered, as though this offered some consolation.

Hopper huffed; "I'm too old for that shit. Besides, there's only one..." He cut himself off, furious at his verbal diarrhea.

Steve's eyes went wide; "Oh Ok, now we're talking!"

How the hell had they got into this conversation? Hopper made an immediate pact to never be nice to anyone again, ever. Steve entirely missed the murderous stare that Hopper was firing at him; "Well, have you told her how you feel?"

"It's complicated," Hopper growled, He sped up, hoping Harrington would get the hint. Instead, Steve trotted to keep up with him while his hair bounced perkily in the breeze.

"Do you think she likes you?"

"Christ."

Hopper increased his pace, he was now practically jogging down the street. Steve kept pace with him easily, seemingly unaware of their sudden foray into exercise. Hopper could have strangled him, running alongside him like a fucking gazelle, whilst he was already wheezing.

Steve launched into a soliloquy about relationships, and how he had learned the hard way about pushing too hard, and how jealousy had ruined things for him and Nancy. Hopper tried to block it out, but mortifyingly, a lot of it was hitting home. Hopper came to a stop and, putting his hands on his knees, was gulping for oxygen. Steve was still talking, a muffled noise that Hopper didn't hear over the ringing of his ears.

"And, if it doesn't happen, I guess you just have to move on." Steve was stood with his hands on his hips, speaking like a coach to his linebacker. Hopper merely muttered; "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Dude, you're really out of breath. You better take more care of yourself, you're not going to win her over by hyperventilating every time you go for a walk." Steve's voice was full of concern at the severe lack of athleticism in front of him.

Hopper looked up at him, a feeling of rage overtaking the urge to be sick. He stood up, slowly and took a few steady breaths.

"Well thanks for the pep talk Harrington, I feel so much better," Hopper said, voice dripping with as much sarcasm as he could, considering he was still out of breath.

Totally missing the barb in the Chief's voice, Steve continued; "Well if you need any more dating advice, let me know!" Steve smacked Hopper once on the back as he turned to go.

Hopper spun round on his heel with a speed that would have made Wonder Woman proud; "That is not...do not tell anyone that..that you gave me... dating advice.", Hopper hissed the last two words.

"Ok, ok!" Steve held up his hands in supplication.

Hopper crossed the street, a vein in his temple throbbing angrily as he realized he was nearly at Melvald's in his effort to get away from that do-gooder Harrington.

As he drove past, Steve was waving at him benevolently, like a therapist who sees his patient avoid jail.

But, later as he finished his report in the safety in his office, as much as he hated to admit it, the damn kid did have a point. Perhaps it was time to make a few changes...

Watchful as his daughter was, it was unsurprising that Eleven had quickly learned to avoid the subject of Joyce, when talking to her Dad, only mentioning her when absolutely necessary to the conversation.

"Can I go over there for dinner next Thursday? Mrs. Byers said they're going to get a Colonel Sanders?" Eleven asked one morning, looking nonplussed at the prospect of kidnapping a member of the military.

"Yeah sure, I'm on a late shift. Can you ask...Joyce to drop you home?" Lately, her name always seemed to catch in his throat.

"Ok", Eleven said simply, observing Hopper wash the dishes. The towel in her hand was completely forgotten. "I think she misses you." She said quietly.

Hopper placed a dish on the rack, rested his hands on the sink and sighed; "Come on El, don't do this to me."

"She does, why don't you call her? You're so sad."

"That's not how it works when you hurt someone Kid, you wait for them to make the first move when they're ready."

"That doesn't sound right to me", she said as she wiped some water off the counter.

Hopper chuckled; "Too much Dallas."

"Mike tried to speak to me every day, for nearly a year. Even when he thought I was gone."

It was typical of his luck that Hopper was being schooled in the romantic department by a teenager.

"I'm not having this discussion with you, you're barely out of diapers," Hopper said churlishly.

"Does that mean I'm right?", she looked at him with those guileless eyes of hers and he sighed in frustration. He walked over to the couch and plonked himself down, Eleven followed and looked down on him with an expression of pity. Somehow, that was much worse.

"Listen, I need to tell you something."

Eleven was still ravenous for life lessons, given that she had spent most of her formative years in a lab. She instinctively knew that she wouldn't like this lesson, but sat down anyway.

"Sometimes, even though two people like each other very much, it doesn't always work out. Sometimes people are just too different for their friendship or relationship, to keep them together. It's very sad, and frustrating, and unfair but that's how it is."

Eleven had no idea that he was practically explaining divorce to her, and he was doing so without ever having been in a relationship with Joyce Byers, and that seemed very unfair to him too.

"Sounds like giving up to me." She said after a pause.

Hopper threw his hand to his forehead; "Jeeeee, I'm not giving up! I will always be there for her, and Will and Lurch when they need me. But when everyone else, except your daughter I'd like to add, is telling you to back off, let her move on, you have to listen to those voices. She deserves better than what I can give her right now, ok?"

Eleven scrunched up her face in dislike, and whilst she nodded to what he said, her rebellious heart decided to think otherwise.

Will and El regularly discussed what had gone wrong between the two adults, and whether it was salvageable. Eleven had shared her hopes with him, but Will knew something of the consequences of an unhappy relationship, and even though he loved Hopper, he didn't want them to be together if they would end up miserable.



"Dad just needs to work on some of his flaws," Eleven said forlornly into her walkie talkie a few nights later.

"That could take years, in the meantime, Mom will be on her own," Will replied after a pause.

"Hopper can make her happy, I know it."

"I don't know El, I think she feels guilty about Bob, and Hopper can be kinda miserable."

"GUYS. STOP USING THIS CHANNEL TO SET UP YOUR PARENTS." Dustin's voice shouted from the speaker. "THIS CHANNEL IS FOR EMERGENCIES ONLY!"

"It is an emergency," Eleven said sadly.

"Affairs of the heart are not an emergency El, Demogorgan's and Thessellhydra's are emergencies. One of us going missing? EMERGENCY. Someone possessed? EMERGENCY." Dustin said matter of factly.

"You used this channel two days ago to ask for advice on what summer camp to go to?" Will replied accusingly.

There was a short silence; "That's different, camp can make or break summer guys!"

"Uh-huh, which camp has the biggest magnet is very important." A girl's voice piped up.

"Shut up Max."

"You'd be better off spending your time trying to improve your arcade skills." The redhead laughed.

"Anyway, this channel is for emergencies," Dustin said again, desperate to change the subject.

"I'm gonna go, Dad's home," Eleven said to the now bickering group.

"Night El!", They all intoned as she pushed down the aerial.

Despite all the nay-sayers and her Dad's apparent lack of hope, Eleven still believed that Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers belonged together. After all, she had experienced first-hand of how powerful hope is.

Little did Eleven know how much things were about to change over the next few months...

## 13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13 – Little Alice fell down the hole, bumped her head and bruised her soul."

Joyce made no attempt to batter out a tune with the pencil she was hitting on the cash register.

It was hot, too hot for May and Melvald's had been unusually quiet for a couple of days. Her normally busy shifts had left her with nothing to do except stew in her own frustration and sweat. The store's air conditioning unit whirled feebly, and cut out every half-hour. Joyce had torn apart the packaging for a desk fan and plonked it unceremoniously next to her on the cash register. Each oscillation sent the damp tendrils bustling around Joyce's face but somehow she didn't feel any cooler, she was still having nightly dreams involving the Chief of Police, and whilst she couldn't exactly describe them as sex dreams, they involved a level of intimacy and contact that never left her satisfied. She would wake up, hands screwed into fists and bedsheets twisted around her, despondent with the sudden feeling of loss. She had an itch that she desperately wanted to scratch, and there is nothing worse than not being able to get to it.

She hadn't seen Hopper since January, and she'd been through the whole spectrum of human emotion. She'd thought about marching into the station and wringing his neck across his desk, she'd fantasized about walking in there and putting his desk to an entirely different purpose, but most of all, she missed him. Every morning she was reminded of Jim Hopper as she grabbed her keys off the rack he had bought her for Christmas. Jonathan often found her staring at it, until he would invariably cough and grab his own car keys, making her start in surprise. She missed him sitting at her dining table, smoking and drinking beer, the way he would call the house sometimes to check on her and the kids.

All those months of craning her neck out the store window to try and catch a glimpse of him as he went about his business, had done away with a lot of her anger, his judgment had hurt her, but she could forgive him. The fact he was trying to avoid her though was typical Hopper, and it was a level of childishness that made her want to kick

him in retaliation.

She thought often about calling him and opening some kind of discourse, but she didn't know where to start, and often worried that she would confuse confronting him, with asking him out on a date.

So that left nothing to do, except to listlessly batter pencils against random bits of shop furniture, with varying degrees of savagery. It was Friday afternoon, and she was looking forward to closing up the shop and spending an unusually free weekend with her boys when Karen Wheeler walked into the shop and made a hurried beeline for the cash desk.

"Joyce!" She said breathlessly.

"Oh Hey Karen," Joyce gave her a smile but continued to tap her pencil in some kind of pent up sexual aggression.

"So, is there anything I need to know?" Karen spoke so fast, it was difficult to decipher where one word ended, and the other started.

Joyce looked at her in confusion; "About what?"

Karen huffed and leaning forward over the counter asked; "About you and The Chief of Police?"

At his name, the pencil immediately stilled, as though waiting for further instructions.

"No? Why would there be?"

"Oh come on Joycie!" Karen said in exasperation. "You can tell me, there is only one reason why Jim Hopper has suddenly started hitting the gym." Karen looked at her expectantly, but at Joyce's utterly perplexed expression she turned and pointed one perfectly manicured finger out the window.

For a moment Joyce stared stupidly at the end of Karen's finger, but on following its trajectory she saw two officers standing across the road. One was wearing the tell-tale brown uniform of the police chief, but the outline of this man was jarringly unfamiliar to her. For one moment she panics and wonders whether Hopper has left

Hawkins and not told her. But in a frankly alarming wave of relief, she remembers Eleven was at hers for dinner yesterday.

It's only when the officer turns to speak to someone that she realizes it is him, and he has dropped a lot of weight. There is still that broadness to him that betrays his age, but his jaw is more outlined, the muscles on his forearms visible from his rolled-up shirt sleeves. The stubble is ever-present, but it's more closely cropped than before, and his legs look somehow more muscular under his uniform. She drinks in the sight of him, and can't help but make the comparison with teenage Hopper. Suddenly, the heat in the store becomes almost unbearable, whilst her heart begun to thump erratically in her chest.

"Hot damn" she whispers, but loud enough for Karen to hear.

"You didn't know?"

Joyce swallows and turns to Karen, "We actually had a fight, after you and I went out. I haven't seen him since." She says, her eyes involuntarily returning to stare out the window.

Both women are staring intently out the shop window when Hopper finally turns in their direction, startled at finding himself under surveillance, he nods once at Karen and then his eyes are searing, staring right into hers. Her heart stutters and abruptly she feels the boundaries of her body blur under his gaze. Her knee's register an emergency and give way from underneath her. When Karen turns to smirk at her companion she finds Joyce crouched by the cash register, fingers splayed on the counter.

"What are you doing Joyce, get up?"

Joyce mumbles something about looking for till roll, but after several minutes concedes defeat and returns to her normal altitude, albeit extremely flustered.

"He looks good doesn't he?", Karen states, that Joyce silently thinks is a massive understatement.

When Joyce finally plucks the courage up to look out of the window again, he is gone and the previous flutter of excitement is replaced

with bitter disappointment. Karen was watching Joyce in amusement, as she tried to desperately to act nonchalant. Joyce was applying her third price tag to a lampshade when his voice rumbles, frighteningly close at hand; "Afternoon Ladies."

The lampshade nearly meets its early demise on the floor of Melvald's before Joyce manages to catch it at the last second. She makes a show of putting it away carefully on the shelf before she turns around. Hopper is thumbing his hat, as always. He looks even better at this distance, but Joyce tries desperately to look anywhere else, other than in the eye.

"Hey there Chief," Karen offers when it appears that Joyce has lost the ability to speak.

"Hi Karen, the family ok?"

"Sure are!" Karen replies brightly but staring at Joyce with emphasis.

"Joyce", he says softly.

"Hey Hop," She replies finally looking him in the face rather than acting like an alert Gopher on sentry duty, she's pretty sure her cheeks are radioactive with blushing. His eyes are warm and soft, and they speak an apology that says volumes more than he could say in words. She forgives him on the spot and offers him a smile. He takes a stilted breath, and his nostrils flare in an effort to control some kind of emotion. He looks at his shoes, smiling slightly.

The previously forgotten pencil between her fingers now starts to tap insistently on Joyce's knee as if to say; "Look! He's here!"

"Me and Joyce were just saying that you're looking very well at the moment Chief, you been working out?"

Hopper pats his stomach and smiles self-consciously; "Thanks, decided to take care of myself for a change." He addresses this mostly to Joyce who nods encouragingly, far too fervently and for a bit too long to look entirely sane. Karen's shoulders start to shake with suppressed laughter.

"How are you both?", he says after an awkward pause.

Joyce in her effort to regain an air of normalcy throws her hands in the air and says; "Oh, Great. I'm great!", the pencil sees its opportunity for it to return to the mothership, and flying out of Joyce's hand hits Hopper squarely in the chest. He looks at the pencil surprised, as it lies on the desk in front of him until he reaches out to pick it up.

"Sorry Hop," Joyce mumbles in mortification, trying to lean over the cash register to get her hand colliding with Hopper's, both try to remove their hand at the same time and Karen watches a bizarre mating ritual take place where the male tries to return his courtship gift to the female, only for the female to accidentally jab him in the hand with it.

"Here!", he says taking the pencil and placing it out of reach of Joyce, she stands there mutely, slowly dying from embarrassment. When it appears that Joyce has seemingly lost the ability to speak English, he looks at her seriously and says;

"Well, anyway, I better get back to the station. Was good to see both of you,"

"Sober." He finishes, smiling somewhat mischievously.

Karen laughs impishly and whacks him with her hand, "Us Mom's deserve a good night out, once in a while Chief."

"Uh-huh, Billy Idol would have appreciated your Karaoke attempts anyway."

Both women look at him in confusion, but he's already turned and walking away. Joyce can't help but look at his ass as he exits the shop, walks across the road, and gets in his vehicle.

Karen is watching her, shaking her head pitifully and laughing; "Girl, you got it bad. "

Exposed so fully, Joyce can only push the hair out of her face and try to regain some semblance of normality.

"Fancy a drink later?", her voice almost begs.

Karen replies; "Be at mine for eight, I'll supply the alcohol."